This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

+ *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.

+ *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.

+ *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.

+ *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at `http://books.google.com/`

POLICY AND PASSION

600061903P

POLICY AND PASSION.

A Novel of Australian Life.

BY

MRS. CAMPBELL PRAED.

IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL. III.

BIBLIOTHECA
· APR. 1881 ·
BODLEIANA.

LONDON:
RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON,
Publishers in Ordinary to Her Majesty the Queen.
1881.

[*All Rights Reserved.*]

251. i. 216.

CONTENTS OF VOL. III.

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	‘AT THE CENTRE OF PEACE’	1
II.	MR. VALLANCY’S RETURN	26
III.	‘IF I HAVE BEEN BAD TO YOU, IT IS ENDED NOW’	41
IV.	AN INTERVIEW WITH SAMMY DEANS	59
V.	NEWS BY THE MAIL	74
VI.	IN PERIL	95
VII.	SAVED	117
VIII.	SINISTER OMENS	138
IX.	THE DINNER TO GENERAL COMPTON	154
X.	BEFORE THE OPENING OF PARLIAMENT	175
XI.	THE ORDEAL	193
XII.	THE IMPEACHMENT OF THE PREMIER	223
XIII.	LAST WORDS	258
XIV.	THE KNOTTING OF THE THREADS	286

POLICY AND PASSION.

CHAPTER I.

'AT THE CENTRE OF PEACE.'

ANGELA was very ill. From the date of Dyson's visit to Kooralbyn she had drooped visibly, though she did not complain, and strenuously resisted any suggestion of her father's that Mrs. Ferris should be summoned from Leichardt's Town.

The old man tortured himself with forebodings, which gave place to rallyings of hope when she assured him that nothing was really amiss with her, and that she was only ‘so tired.’ He found comfort in the reflection that Angela, the child of warmth and sunlight, had always faded in the winter. She could not endure the breath of cold; her whole being seemed to expand with the life of nature, the song of birds, and the luxuriance of growth. He told himself, with a vain effort at conviction, that her strength and energy—little enough at best—would revive with the spring.

It came into Angela’s mind at this time that she would paint a portrait of herself for Barrington, who had often expressed a desire to possess her likeness. She felt feverishly excited at the thought of gratifying his wish, and had all the sentimental pleasure of a poetic nature in thus providing an ever-present remembrance of herself for the man she loved.

She fancied that thus there might ever be two Angelas near him: the earthly one, whose wistful gaze would always awaken regret for the little bush-flower whom he had loved so lightly—the other, that invisible spirit of the air, who would fan his brow and carry sweet thoughts to his soul and whisper tender words in his dreams.

One day her father entered the studio unawares, and found her weeping bitterly over her easel.

'Angela, my darling!' he cried, 'why are you doing this? If you really wish to paint your own portrait, my love, wait till you are well and bright again. Do not perpetuate this pale face. In the springtime you will be yourself once more, rosy and gay. Be patient till then, and do not sadden both yourself and me.'

'Father,' said Angela, tremulously, 'I want to paint my face as it looks now. It is a whim, a freak. Your little girl was always very wilful, and indeed you used to say that she must not be crossed in anything she took to heart—and so I must have my way. When I have finished the picture I will put it by, and it shall vex you no more. Father,' she added presently, 'will you gather me a cluster of the ti-flowers that grow by the creek, and some of the lotus-lilies and the blossoms of the gum-tree. See, I have a bunch here, but they are withering—only the scent remains.' She lifted the drooping flowers from her lap and held them to her lips. 'Do you know why I love flowers so dearly? The fairies have told me that they are living things—just as you and I are living, and the perfume of a blossom is its soul. The petals fade and droop, but the soul becomes a flower-angel. . . . Is the picture like me, father?'

'It has your eyes, my darling, but they see a vision which I know not. Angel, put it away; I cannot bear to look at that pale face; it vexes me. Whom have I in the world but you?'

'Take me to the lagoon, father,' said Angela, restlessly, 'and let me gather the lilies for myself.'

'It is getting late, my love, and the dew is falling.'

'There is no dew yet; and if there were, O father, nothing hurts those the fairies love—it will not harm me. The sun is high yet. I want to watch the changing lights upon the mountains. I must finish my study of sunset-colouring soon; the sunsets are so much more beautiful in the winter. Leave me by the water's edge for a little while. Let me gather the lilies and watch the plain and the sky, and dream a picture. Come, father.'

He took her to the lagoon and left her alone as she desired, returning to the studio, where he remained for a long time gazing at her incompleted portrait. When the shadows began to lengthen he went back to seek her, but she was not in the spot where he had placed her; and after calling her once or twice and receiving no reply, he imagined that she had gone within.

But she had wilfully stolen from his sight to a spot a little higher up the banks, where the hills dipped down into the lagoon. She had seated herself upon a knoll among the sedgy reeds and grass. The setting sun was mirrored in the lake, deep, deep below the lily-leaves, and it seemed to her to resemble her own sun, which was going down too.

Suddenly as she sat, some lines in the poem which Barrington had read to her by the river entered her mind:

'And the great world shall go round to renewing of days; but to-morrow
I shall be deep in the heart of the hills, at the centre of peace.'

And she saw him as in her dream-world, and she herself rising higher and higher in light air, mid shadowy forms and sweet sounds, where, mingling her voice with the breath of the wind, she might murmur softly:

'Love, my love! no harm shall come nigh thee when Angel is near.'

A mist rose from the lagoon and shrouded the valley in its deadly exhalations. Chill and sore Angela crept homewards.

Upon the next morning she did not appear as usual, and when her father went to her bed he found her lying with bright eyes and scarlet lips, while her hair was tossed all about the pillow, and her thin hands moved uncertainly over the bedclothes.

'I'm so thirsty,' she said, in a helpless, wandering way. 'Old Nilparoo has stretched his arms out over the plain and has dried up the springs and the rivers, and there is no water anywhere, and the lilies are all gone.

There are knives cutting into my chest, and I'm so hot. Oh, let us go away—away to the sea. Let us get into a ship and float,

'"Swift as a cloud between the sea and sky,
Beneath the burning moon seen far away,
Mountains of ice like sapphire piled on high."

And then there's the serpent gleaming in the water . . . . and oh, I'm so thirsty! I wish mother were here.'

'She shall come; she shall come at once, my love,' cried Mr. Ferris. Angela did not usually call her step-mother by the dearer title, and the old man cursed his own folly in not having recalled his wife sooner.

He rushed out to the kitchen and consulted with Keziah, who laid a poultice upon Angela's chest, and prepared an unwholesome decoction of stale bread, which she called toast-water, and which the sick girl drank greedily.

'She has been and caught a chill,' said Keziah, later, 'all along of her wandering ways; and I don't know, no more than a baby, what ought to be done. She has been light in her head, but she is getting quiet now, and stupid like. There's all the bread in the oven, and not a man upon the place but islanders. If I was you, Mr. Ferris, I'd ride over the creek and bring Mrs. Deans across. She has had a child of her own, and ought to know something about sickness. and till she comes, I'll stop with the poor thing and do what I can.'

After her wandering talk, during which she mingled in strange confusion the myths and realities of her fancy, Angela seemed to fall into a state of semi-stupor, and lay still with anxious breathing, and flushed face turned sideways upon her pillow. Clearly Keziah was totally inefficient as a nurse, and was moreover continually upon the point of dissolving into tears; while Mr. Ferris, like many womanish, self-absorbed men, had no knowledge of how to deal practically with illness. Something must be done at once, and the doctor—there was none nearer than Kooya—must be summoned. Keziah's suggestion of fetching Margaret Deans was a good one, and Mr. Ferris saddled his horse and rode across the creek to the free selector's hut.

Margaret was ironing in the front room, and Sammy, who had arrived the previous evening from Leichardt's Town, was curled up in an arm-chair, with his pipe in his mouth, and a newspaper before him. Mr. Ferris was too deeply agitated to take any notice of his friend's return.

'Mrs. Deans!' he said imploringly, 'I want you to come straight over to the station. Angela, my daughter, is ill. I don't know what is the matter with her, but I think that it is some sort of inflammation of her chest. I must send for Mrs. Ferris at once. There is no one but Keziah. Will you look after the child till my wife comes? I know that you are a good nurse. Put on your bonnet, like a kind soul, now—directly.'

Margaret Deans was a good-natured creature, and put down her iron with an expression of deep concern.

'Happen she have caught a chill, Mr. Ferris. She were a poor weak thing at her best. Yes, I'll come, and welcome. Sam and Black Charlotte can look after Granny while I'm away; can't you, Sam?'

'Mister Ferris don't seem to think now't of me,' growled Sam, sullenly.

'My daughter is ill!' cried Mr. Ferris, wildly. 'How can I give a thought to anything else? Sam, you know how a man feels when his only child is ailing.'

'Ay!' said Sam, with bitterness; 'I tow'd you there were one thing as cut all men alike to the quick. Hain't I known what it were to know your only one was dyin', and to be pent up between iron bars, so that for all the fierce fire that were ragin' in your heart, you could not get to the little one that you loved better nor your life. . . . . And what would you say, Mr. Ferris, if I were to tell you what had set your gell frettin' and ailin' ?'

'What do you mean ?' cried the old man. 'Speak, and don't keep me in suspense. What should have made her ill ? She has caught a cold ; she was always delicate. She has not been fretting. What should she have fretted for ? Oh ! be quick, my good woman. Get on your bonnet, for the love of God. Don't be longer than you can help.'

'It's always them as are nearest that are blindest,' returned Sammy. 'I never tow'd you how I had seen Angela, your daughter, daundering beside the creek with that long Englishman, Barrington — the fellow that folks say is mad with love for Miss Longleat. I never tow'd you that he wur holding your Angela in his arms, and kissing her face, and that she wur looking up at him and telling him that she wanted nowt but to be near him.'

'You are mad!' cried Mr. Ferris. 'My Angela, who had no thought but of her art; that child love! It is impossible!'

'You had a notion that she wur nowt but a child, and all the time he wur turning her into a woman. Ay; he kissed her, and fondled her, and made believe that he loved her. It's the way of some men with women. I am speaking as true as Shakespeare, Mr. Ferris. If you doubt me, go and ask her who held her in his arms by the creek agen the selection, and who kicked Sammy Deans out of the tree where he had the ill-luck to be sitting, hearing all that was said. Hasn't it been since Barrington took up with Miss Longleat that she has drooped and dwindled?'

'If I thought that this was true!' moaned Mr. Ferris. 'Oh, my Angel! if I thought that this was true!'

'Ask her,' repeated Sam. 'Bid her tell you whether Barrington did not fool her into loving him; and if it is not Miss Longleat who has bewitched him from her?'

A heavy curse upon Honoria fell from the old man's lips. It seemed as though his pent-up hatred of Longleat's daughter found vent in the imprecation; for, with the inconsistency of his warped nature, his fury seized more fiercely upon her than upon Barrington.

It had ever been so. The joys which had fallen to her lot had appeared to him the outpourings of the cup of his daughter's happiness. Riches, beauty, health, and now love—all were hers, while to Angela there remained but the endowment of genius—the richest of gifts in one sense, in another the poorest.

Angela was dying! A prophetic instinct

carried this conviction to his heart, and filled it with a sense of unbearable misery. The blow which felled him now, seemed more dire than any he had yet received, depriving him of the very motive of existence—and it had been dealt him by Honoria Longleat, whom he hated with the unreasoning hatred that is born of jealousy.

'Sam!' he exclaimed hoarsely, clutching the free selector's arm as he spoke; 'if what you have told me is true, if wrong has been done to my darling, I'll crush them father and daughter—crush them both! Neither his wealth nor her beauty shall avail them anything; his world shall know him for what he is. . . . . If my Angela is taken from me, it is no matter whether I live or die. Death has no terrors, life no motive, no joy. I'll go away from this place, and wander about the earth a vagabond again. It has all come to me since this morning. I did not know before that she was in danger, and I'm mad, man; I tell you that I'm mad! Is my only one to be laid low, while *his* daughter flourishes on the fat of the land, and takes all for which my Angela yearned? Is *he* predestined to triumph, while I am foredoomed to failure? If there were a God in heaven, happiness and misery would be held more evenly in the balance. . . . . And I could brand him as a felon—he, the Premier of Leichardt's Land. I could tread him down like a worm in the dust!'

'Do you mean what you say, Mr. Ferris?' cried Sam, starting from his chair, his white, leering face wearing an expression of intensified eagerness. 'Will you let me have a sight of those papers in the safe?'

'Bah!' cried Mr. Ferris, shaking him off. 'It is your own paltry revenge that you are seeking. My sufferings are nothing to you. Come, Mrs. Deans'—for Margaret, equipped, and with a small bundle in her hand, had entered

—'do not let us waste another moment. Sam, I have a favour to ask of you. Will you take the buggy down, post-haste, to Kooya, telegraph there to Mrs. Ferris to meet you, and bring back both her and the doctor. For God's sake don't refuse me! There's not a man about the place, except the islanders. All the hands are mustering at Binbilla. Will you go, Sam—at once? I cannot leave my daughter.'

'Yes, I'll go,' replied Sam, slowly; 'though you did not give a thought to me when I were in quod, and couldn't get nigh the little chap. But though my revenge is paltry, I am still thinking of it, Mr. Ferris. I'll go, if you will promise me that should the worst you fear happen, you'll let me have a sight of those papers in the safe.'

'Man!' cried Mr. Ferris, passionately, 'do you expect that I will make bargains about my daughter's life? Come, all this time I am away from her; will you go, or not? Since you must make conditions—I accept them. If the worst happens—if Angela dies—I shall become a devil; and then nothing will be left but a devil's revenge on fate.'

He mounted his horse, and rode back across the creek. Sammy Deans and his wife waited to place Granny in the charge of a domesticated black gin, then followed, walking as fast as they could to Kooralbyn, which was about a mile and a half distant.

Keziah was still watching Angela, who, during her father's absence, had remained in the same state of stupor. Sammy Deans put the horse in the buggy and drove towards Kooya, while Margaret took possession of the sick-room, making, with the aid of 'Buchan' and her own practical experience, a mental diagnosis of Angela's case, and applying such remedies as appeared patent to her understanding.

Oh, those long weary days, during which the poor girl lay still and heavy, or tossed restlessly upon her hot couch, with a sharp cough rending her frame, and pain racking her chest and limbs; and those dragging nights, when the old man sat open-eyed and tearless by his child's bedside, watching her slightest movement, and listening with heart-rending anxiety to the delirious babblings which too clearly revealed her secret. She murmured of caresses and of wooing words; of love, the sport of a summer's day; and of love high and undying as the stars; vague, poetic fancies mingled with expressions of passionate tenderness and angry jealousy, which made her father, writhing in the bitterness of his wrath, marvel that so human an emotion could exist in so pure a shrine.

And through the night-watches he prayed, as never had he prayed before, that his darling's life might be spared, yet knowing all the time that his petitions were futile, and that the priestess whom he had dedicated to the service of Art might never be consecrated in the goddess's temple.

A wild and unreasoning craving for vengeance took possession of Ferris's soul. Passing by the real despoiler of Angela's peace, it clamoured like an evil spirit against the man from whom he had received benefits, which his distorted imagination construed into insults. All his life long, since they had been boys in England together, he had hated Longleat. They had started upon the race of life with the seeds of enmity in their hearts. Ferris had been puny and insignificant, Longleat healthy and well-favoured. Then disgrace had fallen upon the young Hercules, and Ferris's star had risen. As quickly again it had waned. Poverty and inappreciation had been his portion, and when years' later he had come out to Australia, in the position of a beggar, his old rival had met him in that of a patron. Longleat was mighty now, and he was poor, soured and obscure; Longleat was the master—he was the servant; and Longleat's daughter, in the insolence of her beauty and wealth, presumed to triumph over his shrinking lamb, and to steal away her lover.

One night, or rather early morning, just as the dawn was breaking, Angela awakened, with eyes bright and sensible, and smiled in her father's face.

'You are better, my darling?' he exclaimed rapturously. 'Oh, you will soon get well now, and we shall be happy together in Italy!'

Angela lifted her wasted hand and softly stroked his, while she gazed with wistful tenderness into his eyes.

'Father,' she said, and her voice was so faint that he was forced to stoop low before he could catch her words, 'you look so gaunt and white—you have not slept. All this time you have been watching me . . . I have had strange dreams, but they're past now, and the pain is past too, and I feel no weight or aching—only so tired . . . Have you sent for Mrs. Ferris? I don't want her now. Tell her not to come—she will be sorry to leave Honoria. She always loved Honoria best; she has not understood me. Ah! I've seen my own mother, standing there, beyond the mountains, all in the golden light. She is waiting—waiting to carry me away. And she smiled at me, and bade me go with her. You see, father, death is not pain—only floating upwards into a higher, clearer light. . . .'

A strange awe crept over him as he listened to her babbling. The world beyond, so manifest to her—so visionary to him—was it indeed a reality, and did his girl-wife, with all her artistic sympathies, her tender grace, and never-waning belief in his ultimate achievement of greatness, wait now in the golden light to welcome her child?

'Angel!' he whispered, 'give her a message from me. Tell her that I've done nothing—nothing; that I am lonely and miserable and disappointed—that there is hope for me neither in life nor in death. Tell her—if, indeed, there is a world beyond the grave—to visit me sometimes in my dreams, and teach me to believe in heaven.'

'The angels may always speak in dreams to those they love,' said Angela, solemnly. Then she closed her eyes, and he sat watching her, believing that she was sleeping.

But after a little while she opened them again and whispered:

'Father, give the picture that I have painted of myself to Mr. Barrington—the picture that I have never finished. But he will understand. . . . And when I'm dead bury me by the creek, under the cedar-tree, where we used to sit and talk. . . . Put some of the lotus lilies on my grave, and the ti-tree flowers. Let the birds and butterflies fly over my head, and when the cedar-blossoms fall, let them lie—I am only a little bush-flower too. . . . And the river will rush by me; but I shall have learned all that it could ever tell me. And he will go sometimes, perhaps, and lay a flower on my grave—but never *her*—never tell her that I loved him. . .'

Suddenly she caught his hand, and with an effort raised herself:

'Promise,' she whispered earnestly, 'that you will send him the picture without a word—that you will not be angry with him. I was only his little sister Angel. He loves me still—so. Promise, father, promise——'

She entreated till he bowed his head in assent to her wish. Then she closed her eyes again, and continued to murmur disjointed sentences, but so low that even to his strained ears her words were inaudible. At last, lifting her head, with bright gaze fixed upward, she said in louder tones:

'Mother! I am coming. It is sunrise, and I see you in the red light. Hold out your arms again. I am coming, mother!'

And when the day had burst Angela was with her mother.

CHAPTER II.

MR. VALLANCY'S RETURN.

THE Torres Straits mail-boat was steaming at mild speed up the Leichardt river; she had passed the islands which studded the wider channel, and was winding between glossy plantations of bananas and fields of pine-apples. Further on, the low mangrove-covered banks were almost flush with the water; here and there, a beacon stretched out its long white arms, or a red buoy marked the whereabouts of a sandbank.

Now the hills rose more abruptly, and were covered with bungalow-like houses, overshadowed by trees, and far-back gardens which seemed to stretch into the shadow of the interminable forest. Every outline was sharply defined against a clear horizon ; the westerly wind rippled the water, and the air bore that sense of exhilaration peculiar to an Australian winter's day.

The passengers on board the *Boomerang* were a motley collection. Fresh arrivals from England or the East, who discussed the doubtful charms of the landscape, bearded squatters from the coast districts, bushmen and their wives 'going South' for a trip, dingy commercial travellers and nondescript northern residents, clustered in groups upon the deck ; while rising from the saloon might be heard the cackle of voices, mingled with rough laughter and imperative calls to the steward for the spirituous refreshment which is a necessity of life on board an Antipodean steam-boat.

Mr. Vallancy had just come up from the saloon, where he had been drinking a glass of brandy at the expense of a fellow-passenger. He was flushed and excited, but, nevertheless, more sturdy and respectable in appearance than when he was last upon the scene in Leichardt's Town. The three months which he had passed in the northern wilds, away from the (to him) baleful influences of civilisation, had improved him both morally and physically. The roughness of his life, the frequent exposure to danger, the absence of temptation to nights of gambling and intemperance, and to promiscuous indulgence in spirits and tobacco, had already imparted a more manly, self-reliant expression to his face, and had stirred in his heart a softer longing for domestic happiness than he had known for years.

He had never since their marriage been so long separated from his wife; and, as is often the case with irritable, self-indulgent natures, he missed her in a manner surprising to himself. Without her presence, existence seemed flat, and lacked the daily stimulus of her scorn or languid approval, her anger or indifference. A hundred times in the day, her face, with its charm of varying expression, rose before his imagination's eye. He resolved strenuously upon an amended mode of life; her companionship would, he reflected, make this God-forsaken abode tolerable, and he assured himself that, dependent upon her for society, and relieved from the pressure of monetary difficulties, his conduct as a husband would be everything that was exemplary.

He was on the point of writing to Mrs. Vallancy, promising altered behaviour; he had determined upon appealing to her wifely duty, and on begging her to make the earliest arrangements possible for joining him at Gundaroo, when an anonymous letter received one morning by the southern mail disturbed the current of his self-communings and partially dissipated his vision of conjugal contentment.

The epistle, written in a studied, copperplate hand, with occasional faults of diction that betrayed an uneducated source, ran as follows:

'SIR,

'I hope you will pardon the liberty I take in addressing you, which is done entirely for your good and for the sake of fair dealing and honour, as I believe you are not aware of the position you are in, and it goes agen my moral principles to see a gentleman who I knows to be a gentleman fooled by them as sets themselves up to make laws for poor folk, and ain't no better than they should be.

'It is no secret that the Premier had a fight with his colleagues to get you that appointment at Gundaroo, which I make no doubt you had your own reasons for accepting. If I may make so bold I will say that it would have been wiser if you had declined to put yourself under obligations to one who was meditating a wrong against you, and if you had stayed at home to look sharp after your handsome wife—or, better still, if you had *hoaxed the Premier by taking her with you.*

'Now you know what everyone in Leichardt's Town is well aware on. The whole thing was planned between Longleat and Mrs. V. before the post was offered you. They wanted to get you away to a place where you would not be likely to hear what was going on behind your back.

'You'd best know what money you left in her possession, and whether it were enough to buy the smart gowns and the *new* jewellery that she wears, and to pay the debts that bothered her, and which I have reason for saying are discharged. And I can swear as Gospel truth that when L—— is in Leichardt's Town, not a day passes without his crossing the water and spending hours on Emu Point. I have got no motive to serve in giving you this information except, as I said before, that I am a man of moral principles, and know your family, so that it riles me to see you gulled. And so, sir, you can take what notice you please of this letter.

'Your humble
'WELL-WISHER.'

A gentlemanly instinct, faint, still inherent in Vallancy, was sufficiently powerful to prompt him at first to throw the letter in the fire, and to treat its contents with the scorn that an anonymous imputation deserved. But something held him back from destroying it. He read it again, and then many times, till he knew each word by heart, and drank brandy-and-water while he read and pondered, till he almost convinced himself that the accusation had been made in good faith, and that he had in truth been befooled—a position not to be endured by a gentleman of spirit.

It was of course no secret to him that Connie's influence had procured him the appointment at Gundaroo; and he had seen no more shame in accepting the place than he had done in borrowing money from Brian Fielding. But then, in spite of her vanity and love of admiration and her openly-shown indifference to himself, he had always believed that their interests were identical, and that in her heart she entertained for him a lurking regard. Genuine doubt of his wife's fidelity had never entered his mind. A conceited man is always tenacious of his own supremacy.

Now that he had conceived the idea of mistrust, it grew with amazing rapidity. He recalled certain passionate words uttered by his wife in a moment of irritation, which confirmed the suspicion that he had been bribed to go away, and that Connie had never really intended to join him at Gundaroo. A thousand inculpatory circumstances rose to his recollection and deepened the sense of injury.

This brooding over imaginary wrong inflamed his wrath and jealousy. As days went on, he became more and more furious under the feeling of impotency. When, a fortnight later, a chance mail brought a second epistle from his anonymous correspondent, he hesitated no longer, but rode to the nearest point from which telegraphic communication with head-quarters was possible, and wired to the chief of his department for leave of absence, a request which, as we have seen, was granted.

As he neared Leichardt's Town, Vallancy's impatience intensified till it became almost past control. He eagerly inquired at the different ports for information concerning the Premier's movements, with difficulty restraining his anxiety in order to avoid implicating his wife, then putting himself to unnecessary torture by imagining veiled innuendoes in the replies to his somewhat wild questioning.

His imagination worked wildly in conjectures concerning the relations of Longleat and Constance, and he mentally mapped out various plans of action. Should he walk boldly to the house, as though no suspicion were in his mind, or should he lie in wait and surprise a rendezvous? Then he told himself that of course the Premier was aware of his application for leave of absence; nay, the very fact of its having been granted, went a little way towards quelling his apprehensions.

He cursed his folly in not having surprised the position unawares. Doubtless all precautions had been taken, and he should find Connie armed at every point. Finally he determined to be guided by her manner as to the course he would pursue. He almost resolved that he would bid her prepare to accompany him to Gundaroo by the next boat, and if she refused, he would show her the anonymous letters and tax her boldly with her guilt. He would crush her with fierce reproaches, and would then cast her off in her shame. With all a coward's hesitation he shrank from personal encounter with Longleat; it would be easier to confront the woman who had wronged him, and who was more or less in his power.

The steamer carried the English mail, and a greater crowd than usual had assembled to greet her arrival. Friendly handkerchiefs were waved from the various dwellings which sloped to the water's edge, as she steamed slowly round Emu Point, and prepared to moor at the wharf which was situated close to the ferry. Taking advantage of a momentary stoppage of the screw, and of the confusion on deck, Vallancy threw his portmanteau into one of the small skiffs which crowded round the steamer, and bade the boatman row him to the ferry-steps, calculating that he would thus gain a few minutes and avoid recognition on the wharf. It was just possible that his wife might not have been warned of his arrival.

He threw the boatman a shilling, and, leaving his portmanteau at the ferry-house, walked with beating heart up the hill and along the white road, past the row of neat venetianed houses, with their trim gardens and sheltering foliage of pine and bamboo, till he reached the wicket-gate which admitted him to his wife's abode.

The verandah was empty, and the windows of the drawing-room were closed. Like all Australian dwellings, the cottage might easily have been entered unperceived. Skirting the verandah, he caught a glimpse of the light drapery of Mrs. Vallancy's handmaiden as she stooped to spread some fine laces upon the grass at the rear of the house; but of his wife's presence there was no sign.

He softly pushed open one of the venetian shutters, and peered into the drawing-room. The strong scent of gardenias—a perfume which irresistibly recalled Connie — floated towards him; but she was not there.

The piano was unclosed, and a library novel lay with a page turned down upon the sofa. With the quick instinct of jealousy, Vallancy noticed some unfamiliar expensive trifles scattered about the tables. On the mantel-shelf were two pink tickets for a performance by some operatic artists, lately arrived from Sydney, which he divined that the Premier had given her.

'Constance,' he called almost below his breath, half-hoping, half-dreading that she would reply; but there was no answer.

He looked into the dining-room and then into her bedroom, which was empty like the rest; but here there were signs of recent occupation. Her handkerchief lay upon the floor, her garden-hat hung upon the wall. In a tray upon the toilet-table there were several costly rings, and a large locket of plain gold with a cross of pearls upon the oval, which he did not remember to have seen before.

He lingered for some minutes in the chamber, turning over her various properties with a strange mingling of tenderness and fury. Then he returned to the drawing-room and proceeded to inspect it more particularly, seizing upon the loose notes in Mrs. Vallancy's work-basket, in the hope of discovering a clue to her whereabouts. They were merely trivial, social and business communications, and told him nothing. There was a large coloured photograph of Thomas Longleat in a velvet frame upon her writing-table. In a fit of fury Vallancy seized it and tore the print to atoms. Presently his attention was attracted by a blue official-looking envelope, resting face downwards upon the table; it was sealed with the arms of Leichardt's Land. He turned it over, and saw that it was addressed in the Premier's handwriting to Mrs. Vallancy, and marked 'Immediate.'

He tore open the letter and read it eagerly. His face changed; a muttered curse escaped his lips, and he fell heavily upon a chair as though he had been struck by a blow.

The letter contained the confirmation of his wife's guilt.

CHAPTER III.

'IF I HAVE BEEN BAD TO YOU, IT IS ENDED NOW.'

MRS. VALLANCY did not often leave home for the day. The invitations she received generally issued from the borderland of Leichardt'stonian society, and were only accepted when she was safe from observation. In spite of her defiance of conventionality, she had been clever enough to retain an insecure footing upon the upper social stratum, and was careful not to exhibit herself in second-rate company.

Among her own sex, the only intimate associates she possessed were ladies of Bohemian proclivities of whom she was ashamed; it was safer to receive the visits of gentlemen, but of these Longleat's constant attendance deprived her. She had sickened of her empire over this one heart, and just now was very lonely. It was a relief and pleasure when, upon the very morning of the day her husband returned, she had received a warm-hearted note from an old school friend—the wife of a newly-elected member, who had lately arrived from the Far West, and had taken a house in Leichardt's Town for the session—inviting her to spend a long day, that they might talk over old times.

Mrs. Vallancy could not afford to throw away an opportunity of rehabilitating her position, and the renewal of this friendship seemed to present desirable possibilities. Apart from prudential considerations, her heart warmed to the associations of her youth. Ease, freedom from debt, and the possession of ready money, were conditions of life pleasant indeed to her, but the penalty she paid filled her soul at intervals with feelings approaching to loathing and horror.

Oh to breathe for a day in a comparatively moral atmosphere!

She did not demur at accepting the hasty invitation, saw her friend's children, babbled of womanly domestic interests, was condoled with upon her husband's absence, and from the cool verandah watched the big Torres Straits boat steam up the river, and waved her handkerchief to a friend of her friend's, presumably on board, little dreaming who else stood upon the deck.

It will be seen that she had not received Longleat's letter with the intimation of her husband's probable return.

She was driven by her friend into Leichardt's Town, where she invested in various articles of millinery, and was then dropped at the ferry-steps, whence she took the boat to Emu Point, and walked leisurely to her own home, congratulating herself upon the prospect of a quiet evening, with a new novel and immunity from Mr. Longleat's company—for he had told her the night before that a ministerial engagement would detain him upon the north side.

'I wonder whether there will be a letter from Edward this mail,' she murmured, as she walked up the gravel-path, and then began to hum lightly to herself the refrain of a nursery ditty which she had been singing to her friend's children.

She looked very handsome: the shadow of her girlhood softened her face; the haggard lines had gone from about her mouth, her cheeks were flushed and dimpled, and her eyes were bright with exercise. She stepped springily on to the verandah, and, pushing open the drawing-room door, entered.

It was nearly six o'clock, and the winter's day was on the wane. A golden gleam shone in through the half-closed shutters, and fell upon the figure of a man crouched upon the sofa, with a crumpled letter in his hand.

The room swam before Constance's eyes. Her heart seemed to leap up in agonised excitement and then fell with a heavy despair.

'Edward,' she cried, staggering back, and indeed at the moment half in doubt whether it was her husband or his wraith.

'It is I,' he answered, divining her thought, and regarding her with a helpless gaze in which wrath, consternation, and reproach were strangely blended. 'I have come down from the North. You need not be afraid. I am not going to hurt you. I shall not throttle or stab you, like a husband in a book.'

'I—you—you startled me horribly,' she faltered. 'I thought you were at Gundaroo.'

'Safe out of sight and hearing,' he returned, with a ghastly attempt at irony. 'It must be awkward, under some circumstances, to find a husband unexpectedly arrived when he is believed to be two thousand miles away. Let me advise you. It is not prudent to leave home even for a day without taking precautions to lock up your trinkets, and to provide against letters being opened in your absence.'

'I—I don't know what you mean,' she said, blanching visibly, as she recognised the handwriting upon the paper which he held in his hand. 'You have been reading a letter of mine. What right had you to open it? Give it to me at once.'

'By ——!' said Vallancy starting up. 'There are no bounds to your effrontery. You know that this letter is from your lover. You know that you are a guilty woman!'

She made a snatch at the paper which he held above his head.

'Let me see it,' she cried. 'How dare you touch what is mine!'

He placed it close to the fire upon pretence of burning it, then quietly withdrew the missive, folded and conveyed it to his breast-pocket.

'I will not destroy this,' he said. 'It is the proof of your guilt. Well for me that I have learned the truth—that you can fool me no longer. . . . You did not know that I was coming down. I am glad of that. I have taken you unawares. If it hadn't been so, you would have been ready for me, and I might have been fooled into believing that you were an honest woman.'

As he spoke in sharp incisive tones, so unlike his usual manner, Constance uttered a little cry, and cowered back against the wall. She made no denial, but gazed at him for a moment with the look of a wild animal at bay; then, though she trembled in every limb, reared her head aloft with a gesture of defiance, and stood erect with her eyes upon the ground.

As a bride, her husband's violence had

cowed her. Later she had learned to despise it. Now it seemed to her that the melodramatic situation had given birth to a certain spurious dignity in his voice and manner. At the moment, his insignificant personality appeared merged in the abstract right which his moral attitude represented. She was awed into belief in his sincerity. There was still something manly in his nature. For the first time she realised the sharp barrier which divides wrong of intent and of action.

'You know that you are a guilty woman,' he said again.

'No, no!' she exclaimed, faintly; 'not guilty—not as you think. Oh, Edward! spare me.'

'Spare you!' he cried . . . '*you!* . . .'

He came near her, and stood before her, his eyes—it seemed to her, when for a second she raised her own to his face—scorching into her very soul. . . .

She turned very white and grew faint as she listened to the words which followed. A low cry broke from her lips; then the mental agony which she endured reacted upon her frame and braced it to the rigidity of a stone.

Vallancy ceased. He moved away from her, and there was silence in the room, while he, leaning against the mantelshelf, watched her as she stood with bowed head and lowered eyes. Presently he spoke again, but in accents more of reproach than of anger.

'And I put faith in you, Connie—in spite of all your faults, your selfishness, and vanity. I never believed that you were wholly bad. . . . I thought that whatever misfortunes happened to us we would hold together, and be true to each other, and share and share alike. I have meant lately to be a different sort of husband to you. While I have been living alone at Gundaroo I have thought over the past and have regretted much that has happened between us . . . but you might have made allowances. What is a man to do when all the world is against him? I may have nagged at you sometimes, but, on the whole, you had not much to complain of. I never growled at you when you amused yourself; and though you took no pains to make me happy, I was always willing that you should have your pleasures. I thought that it was to be "give and take" between us, and I never suspected you. . . . That night you came down with Longleat in the coach I'd as soon have believed evil of an innocent babe. And to think that you two were plotting together that I was to be shunted off to Gundaroo while you carried on your damnable intrigue! . . . You have appealed to me—like a woman—to spare you. What do you expect? What do you hope for from me? You have calculated and sinned deliberately, and you must know what are the wages of your sin. I have no mercy for you.'

'Are you so stainless? Am I so wicked?' said Constance. 'Think what you please. I will make no further protestation. Our paths divide now, and we must go our different ways. You and I are parted for ever—at least, that is well. . . . Oh, what might not my life have been but for you!' she cried more passionately. 'Is it not you who have made me what I am? You believe me utterly vile. I am not viler than during all the years of my married life. You taught me first to deceive, and that right and wrong are only what *seems*, not what *is*. The good that there was in me has died slowly. You have starved it. You hardened me to shame. . . . When a woman has once endured loathing—disgust beyond words—the rest is as nothing. . . . I never knew before that your standard of virtue was so high, and mine so low. You did not object to take money from men who wished to be my lovers. You held me very cheap. I have not to thank you if I have kept myself—believe me or not, as you choose—so far blameless. You knew that it was for my sake Longleat gave you the Gundaroo appointment, and you made no scruple about accepting it. You never loved me. What consequence is it to you that I am miserable or reckless? We understand each other. Let matters remain as they are, and do you go back to Gundaroo.'

'You are shameless indeed,' cried Vallancy, 'if you imagine that I will allow you to live the life you lead under the shelter of my name!'

Constance was silent for a moment. She gave her shoulders a defiant shrug, and smiled a queer sort of smile. She was thinking of her diamonds and other trinkets, of cheques which had been cashed, of which the money was in her possession; and then she remembered how she had that morning received a passionate letter from Brian Fielding, imploring her to fly to him in Melbourne.

'You shall reap the full harvest of your sin,' continued Vallancy. 'Every finger in Leichardt's Town shall be pointed in scorn at you.'

'What is that to me now?' she cried. 'Has not society scorned me already without due cause? At least I can defy it. There are no more hollow appearances to keep up—no need to mask what I feel. Who knows how I have suffered—struggled? Who would have stirred a finger to guard me? Let me go. This is your house. I will leave it to-night. Will you bid me good-bye?'

Vallancy looked at her in a bewildered way.

'It is getting late,' he said; 'I don't want to turn you out of doors. You had better stay here to-night. I will let you remain in peace. I am going to the other side.'

He got up and took his hat. The room was almost dark; the sun had sunk, and the hearth was cheerless, and the air cold. Mrs. Vallancy moved across the room, and the two stood facing each other. She shivered.

'I will leave your house to-night,' she repeated. 'I can find shelter somewhere. Bah!' she added, with a jarring laugh; 'how tragic it all should be, and yet how utterly flat it is! We have been husband and wife for ten years, and we part now with as little show of regret as though we were to meet again at dinner. You cannot keep up the farce of outraged honour; it is beyond you. Well; it is better that we should not be sentimental—but; haven't you a word to say to me, Edward, before I go?'

She stretched out her hand to the writing-table, and lighted the tapers upon it.

'There,' she said; 'now we can look at each other—for the last time, perhaps.'

The candles shed a faint illumination upon her figure, and upon a collection of photographs and miniatures that were arranged upon the wall. Among them was a portrait in crayons, roughly executed by Vallancy himself, of their child, which had died when it was a year old. The baby eyes gazing at her with all the unconscious appeal of infancy touched the deepest chord in Connie's heart, if, indeed, she may be said to have possessed such an article. A film gathered before her own eyes, and her frame shook with a suppressed sob, while she dropped her hands with a gesture of quiet despair.

'We have been husband and wife,' she said, and all the recklessness had gone from her voice. 'I am baby's mother; nothing can alter that. When you have hard thoughts of me, think that I might have been different if the child had lived or if you had been kinder. Oh, it is because we women have no independent life—because we are the mere chattels of human brutes, fawning upon our masters when they smile, and slinking away from them when they are angry, that we become false and bad. I might have been a true wife and a happy mother if I had married the man I loved. . . . I thought of that to-day when I was sitting with Agnes Stewart, watching her with her children at play—and I used to despise her when we were girls because she was commonplace and plain. Fate has been kind to her and cruel to me. Why should I have been singled out for rough usage? I, who in my girlhood was always petted and flattered? . . . If you had been gentle with me—if you had not frightened me at first and then made me have a contempt for you—— Do you recollect the first time you swore at me and struck me? . . . . And I grew to hate you. The more familiar I became with you, the worse it was. I knew that you cheated people, and all the time that I was helping you I loathed the thing—and I—— And when baby died there seemed nothing left. If I had not flirted I should always have been thinking, thinking—and that was terrible. . . . But you could never understand; I might go on talking till doomsday and it would be of no use—and why should I wish to excuse myself? That is the misery—to go on for ever and ever with a blank wall of hopelessness before you. . . . . If I have been bad to you, it is ended now. I don't ask your forgiveness; I don't offer to forgive you for any wrong you may have done me. . . . Let us each take up life again, apart from each other, and try to make the best of what is left.'

'You wish me to apply for a divorce,' said Vallancy, 'so that you may be free to marry Longleat.'

'Oh, I don't know what I wish,' said Constance, dreamily, then shuddered violently. 'No, no,' she murmured. 'If I could have my heart's desire for one hour and then die, that would be best for me.'

'I will never give you your freedom,' said Vallancy, slowly and deliberately, misunderstanding the drift of her last words. 'I'll lay my yoke upon you till I die. A man is not made of wood any more than a woman. But what is the use of talking? I never set up for a saint; I did not expect to find you one; I was ever ready to excuse you if you were a little worse than others. I knew that I had disappointed you. But I loved you; I was always true to you. It was your selfishness and indifference that drove me to drink. . . . Now I don't care what becomes of me. Let me have my revenge upon Longleat, and then the sooner I go to the devil the better.'

She looked at him keenly from under her lashes, as though to satisfy herself how much of his language was empty bombast; then turned from him and passed through an inner door.

'Good-bye, Edward,' she said, pausing for a moment upon the threshold. 'Goodbye.'

CHAPTER IV.

AN INTERVIEW WITH SAMMY DEANS.

VALLANCY did not attempt to follow his wife, but staggered out of the room and walked blindly down the garden-path, like a man in a dream.

He passed through the little gate and gazed helplessly up and down the road, uncertain how to proceed. As the latch clicked behind him, a slouching figure emerged from the shadow of a tree, and a white leering face, totally unfamiliar to him, confronted him in the dusky light.

'D—n you,' cried Vallancy. 'What are you doing here? Why don't you get out of my way?'

Sammy Deans, for it was he, looked in nowise disconcerted by this rough address.

'Mr. Vallancy,' he replied coolly, 'you look as though something had gone agen the grain with you. I have been waiting here to have a word with you in private, ever since I see'd your good lady go in. I have got summat particular to tell you.'

'Well,' said Vallancy, his attention arrested by a certain sinister significance conveyed by Deans's look and manner, 'tell me your business, and be quick about it, for I am in a hurry. What is your name? I do not remember ever having seen you before.'

'Happen my name will keep,' said Sam, imperturbably. 'It were not about myself that I had a mind to talk. You have come down all on a sudden from the north, sir. It ain't but a short time since they made you police magistrate at Gundaroo. Maybe you don't like the place, or happen you have got family business, or you've had letters that have called you down.'

'Yes,' said Vallancy, looking cautiously at the man; 'I have had letters that have obliged me to come to Leichardt's Town. Letters upon family business. Perhaps you can tell me who wrote them.'

'That must be best known to yourself, sir,' said Sam, with equal caution.

'Come,' said Vallancy, roughly, 'I can see by your face that you know more about these letters than you choose to say at present. They were written anonymously, but I have not the least doubt that you are perfectly aware of their authorship. Well, whoever my correspondent may be, I am at least indebted to him for correct information. What will loosen your tongue? You need not hesitate to acknowledge your work. I cannot indict you for libel, however much I might wish to do so.'

'It's a queer thing,' said Sam, reflectively, 'but I've seen it afore now; no matter what a woman is, so long as a man has got her to wife, he is wild with rage if she throws him over. I should have thought it wur a good riddance to bad rubbish; and summat of a satisfaction to have the world open again to choose from.'

'Stop that!' cried Vallancy, whose temper was not in a state to bear irritation. 'What the devil do I care what you think? I suppose you want to be paid for your information, and if so I had better tell you at once that I will not give you a farthing.'

''Twur a friend of mine who wrote those letters,' answered Sam, taking no notice of Vallancy's remark. 'He is a clever chap, and pretty smart at putting two and two together.

There are many things kep dark that he knows. I dare say he could tell you now that there would be a change of Ministry before long. You would be surprised to hear that it rests with him whether Longleat carries his Loan Bill and goes sailing off to England to be knighted by her Majesty, or is kicked out of the Treasury for a scoundrel. No·one 'ud believe it if he was told, but it is true for all that.'

'What!' exclaimed Vallancy, startled into interest. 'I am informed by everyone that Longleat has an overwhelming majority.'

'That may be. He has strutted, and ranted, and bribed, and made a shout of progress, honesty, impartiality, till he has got all Leichardt's Land to believe in him as though he were a god. But suppose that my friend had private information concerning the Premier's past life, that would damn this hero as a rascal, a thief, say—a murderer—an old hand—where would his popularity be then? Gone like a whiff of smoke.'

'That would depend upon whether your friend's information was reliable, and whether he could bring forward evidence to support it,' said Vallancy.

'Suppose it were newspaper evidence,' whispered Sam. 'The report of a trial and conviction, eh? Suppose that, with a few inquiries, Thomas Longleat, Premier, could be identified with a man bearing another name, who was sent out to Western Australia twenty-two years ago? What should you think of that? A charge brought up in the House—Lord, what a stir it would make! If anyone had a grudge against him, and wanted the opportunity for revenge—— As my friend said to me——'

'Oh, drop all that humbug about your friend,' exclaimed Vallancy. 'Look here; let us understand each other. Of course I know that you wrote those anonymous letters. You had better own up to it. I don't suppose that you sent them out of goodwill to me, unless, indeed, as you say, you really did it for the sake of my family. If that is the case, my family never did me a better service, and my worst enemy could not have hit me a harder blow. Tell me your name, my good man. I don't want to be ungracious to you. Let me know who you are, and I may perhaps be able to understand you.'

Sammy Deans somewhat reluctantly owned to his personality.

'Are you not the man who was sentenced to four months' imprisonment for stealing Mr. Longleat's cattle?'

Sammy Deans acknowledged the indictment.

'Then I am beginning to see through you. Your hatred for Longleat is as deep as mine. You would do him an evil turn if you could.

You would make a tool of me to work out some malicious scheme that you have plotted against him.'

'Sir,' said Deans, 'you have had a conversation with your wife; she has acknowledged that what I have told you is true. You speak very short. I have given you information about your wife's goings on that should ha' been received gratefully. You are a gentleman; your honour has been trampled upon. You have a better reason for wishing to crush Longleat than I have. You cannot slink away up north again. Folks would call you a coward. You cannot try horsewhipping, for you would get the worst of it. He is thick-skinned and powerful. Money is no odds to him, but reputation is everything. You can hurt him worse than death if you choose, or if you do not choose I will hit him instead of you. I've my grudge against him, but it ain't no concern of mine which of us punishes him, except that I am a dramatic sort of chap; I like a *dénoomong*, as the Mossoos say. I could take my evidence straight to Middleton, who would not be scrupulous in using it, and would pay me for it better than you will.'

'I am surprised that you have not been to Middleton already,' said Vallancy, suspiciously.

'I'm a dramatic chap,' repeated Sam. 'As I said afore, Shakespeare, the immortal bard, and the footlights. All the world's a stage. Each man owes it to art, to play his part decently, as old Ferris would say. Melodrama—that is what they call it in fine language. The plot is thickening. There's a villain in it, and an artful woman, and an injured husband. The low chap: he that is the instrument of the rest, and finds the papers, and plays second fiddle, that's me. I hain't been eddicated up to play the hero.

He ought to be a gentleman. That is your part, Mr. Vallancy. You'll cut a better figure before the audience than Sammy Deans, the gaol-bird.'

'That's all d——d humbug!' said Vallancy. 'Look here; if you have got any evidence against the Premier that is worth having I'll pay you for it—do you understand? We'll settle the price when I know what your information is. You have got some reason for not going straight to Middleton. He knows you in the police-court, I'll be bound, and you are afraid of being shown up. Let me see your papers, and I'll name my figure.'

'Not so fast, Mr. Vallancy,' said Sam. 'My evidence is right enough, and far too valuable to be let out of my hands easily. And happen it were summat of that sort that kept me from going straight to Middleton, who has got a grudge against me on account of a little business up in the Ubi district; he'd be friendly enough when he knowed what I had got to tell him. I ain't afraid of being shown up, but I have my own reasons for keeping quiet just now.'

At that moment a passer-by—one of the Treasury clerks on his way home—brushed against Mr. Vallancy and his companion. He eyed the police magistrate of Gundaroo, uncertain in the half light as to his identity.

'Hullo, Vallancy!' he cried at last. 'It *is* you. I heard something about your leave. Upon my word, you were lucky to get it so soon, but I suppose the Government is on its p's and q's just now; and then we all know what a friend your wife is of the Premier's. You have come to take Mrs. Vallancy up north, I suppose.'

'No,' growled Vallancy. 'Don't you insult me by talking about my wife and the Premier. I am not going to take her to

Gundaroo. We are best apart. . . . I am sorry I can't talk to you just now. I have some business to attend to. I'll come and see you to-morrow or the next day. Good-night.'

The gentleman looked a little mystified for a moment; then a flash of intelligence crossed his face, and he passed on, the first to spread abroad the news of Mrs. Vallancy's actual disgrace.

Vallancy turned to Deans.

'I cannot stand here with you in the road to discuss this matter. Isn't there any place you know, where we could be quiet for an hour? You need not look at my house. I am not going there any more to-night, and I don't care about being seen with you across the water. Is there any pot-house over here, where there is a private room, and where the people will not recognise me?'

'There's the Banana,' said Sam, thoughtfully; 'if you don't mind the tramp. Come, sir, it's South Leichardt's Town way.'

The two men walked for a little distance up the dusty white hill, then turned into a rugged road which wound round the edge of the cliff. Upon one side, scattered villas alternated with paddocks overgrown by young gum-trees and prickly-pear; on the other, the rocks sloped in natural terraces to the river—a dark blue semicircular riband; while beyond lay the town, with its twinkling lights coming out one by one as the darkness deepened.

They walked on for a mile or more, till at the junction of the Kooyà coach-road, with that leading to Emu Point, they came upon a rough bush-inn, standing apart upon an isolated green, and surrounded by a deep verandah, above which was a sign-board illumined by a kerosene lantern, representing in vivid colouring of green, yellow, and magenta, a banana-tree in fruit.

The bar, occupied at present by a blackfellow and two bullock-drivers, was at one side of the building. At the other, there was a little parlour quite deserted, into which Sammy Deans conducted Mr. Vallancy. It was evident that business was not brisk at the Banana.

'This is where I hangs out,' said Sam, drawing a chair to the log fire which illuminated the dingy place, and proceeding to fill a short black pipe. 'You'll have summat to drink, sir, won't you? We shall come to better terms over a nobbler apiece, and they won't doctor the grog if you order it in the bottle.'

Vallancy nodded, and a bottle of cognac was called for. Vallancy poured out a glass which he drank almost neat, while Sammy Deans mixed a milder decoction, and settled himself comfortably at a corner of the fireplace with the air of a narrator. Vallancy took a cigar from a case in his pocket, and began to smoke also, every now and then drinking another sip of brandy. The haggard lines of anxiety and wrath which had furrowed his face dispersed slowly under the influence of warmth and stimulant.

As Sammy Deans proceeded with the story which in the madness of grief and rage Mr. Ferris had disclosed, his whole countenance became animated by curiosity and eagerness, and he forgot his wife's falsity and the faint stirrings of manly remorse which her reproaches had aroused in his breast, in the exciting interest of the tale.

CHAPTER V.

NEWS BY THE MAIL.

'THE English mail is in! The English mail is in!' was the cry which sounded in Barrington's ears about five o'clock on that same afternoon, as he lounged down King Street behind the excited crowd that was hurrying down towards the Post-Office.

Both within and without, the building seemed a scene of animation.

Ruddy emigrants, noticeable by reason of their eager faces and uncolonial garments; bushmen in cabbage-tree hats and breeches;

women with children in their arms or toddling at their skirts; lost creatures, in tawdry finery, whose coarse, hard countenances were softened by a ray of sentiment at the thought of 'home;' stalwart Englishmen, browned by the tropical sun, who, though prosperous, yet eagerly yearned for tidings of distant friends; old hands, who had inquired oft and anxiously at the same window — all these eagerly demanded if there were any letters from England for them; while apart, little groups, or isolated men and women, devoured with their eyes the thin sheets of foreign paper which fluttered in a light breeze—some smiling, others weeping, as the news might be good or ill.

Each face, young or old, dejected or jubilant, seemed in part to reveal its own history. With the impartial interest of a social philosopher, Barrington stood for a moment at the outskirts of the crowd, and watched the scene.

A middle-aged woman accompanied by a young girl had just returned from the window holding a letter, which she had already opened, in her hand, and as she walked slowly past Barrington, running her eyes down the closely-written pages, she exclaimed to her companion :

'It's from Annie! Now there'll be news of our Jem!' then a moment later uttered a faint shriek, and, clutching the girl's arm, directed her attention to the opening paragraph of the letter.

There was a rush of ejaculations and sobs close to Barrington's ear. What had happened? Only a railway accident to the 'Flying Scotchman,' thirty lives lost—and Jem was stoker of the train.

There seemed an intense grimness in the sight of this desolation, which the news, many weeks after date, carried to these two poor hearts, so many thousand miles distant from the scene of the disaster. For the first time Barrington realised fully the bridge of human interests and emotions which connects the mother-land with her far-off daughter colony. He began to speculate with a certain troubled curiosity upon the probable tidings of his own friends and relations, which the mail had brought for him. His heart stirred at the thought of his mother's letter—would she write coldly, or with affection? Did she miss him? Did she regret having bidden him leave her? But it was vain to wonder. There was no spontaneity in Lady Alice Barrington's moods.

He inquired of a bystander if there would be any town delivery that evening.

No, only the Governor, the Ministers, and such like bigwigs would get their letters sent to them that night. He would have to ask here if he wanted his.

Barrington took his place near the window, and, waiting his turn, made his demand. Two packets were handed out to him. One addressed in a clerkly hand to 'Hardress Barrington, Esq., and marked 'immediate;' the other inclosed in a thin envelope deeply bordered with black.

He started and blanched at the sign of mourning, then reassured himself as he recognised his mother's handwriting. One of his nephews, or perhaps a cousin, was dead. Thank God, nothing had happened to the old lady. Barrington's heart grew tender at the thought of his mother.

He put the letters in his pocket, and, hailing a hansom, dashed down to an hotel, where in the solitude of a private apartment he opened first that from his mother.

It was written in the pointed characters so fashionable a quarter of a century ago, and formally expressed in studied phrases, which seemed to indicate that epistolary correspondence was no light matter to Lady Alice Barrington.

This was the letter:

'Castle Barrington,
'20th April.

'MY DEAREST HARDRESS,

'Never till now have I realised the immense distance by which we are separated. It is hardly conceivable that when this letter reaches you, the mournful intelligence which it bears will be ranked in England among events of the past, and that we shall have so far recovered from the state of bewildered misery into which we have been plunged, as to be able to form definite plans for the future.

'But to state as briefly as possible the terrible calamity which has befallen us. Last week we received an intimation that scarlet fever had broken out in Mr. Hawkins's preparatory school for Eton, where, as you know, Lionel's two sons were placed. Lionel, who was always anxious, and perhaps a trifle over-fussy, where the health of his children was concerned, went down himself to bring them home. They travelled back by that ill-fated Flying Scotchman, which came into collision with a goods train near Grandchester. Thirty persons were killed, and among them my beloved son and my two grandchildren, their bodies mangled in a manner upon which my harrowed feelings will not permit me to dwell. As regards the catastrophe, the papers will furnish you with full particulars.

'Eleanor, who was at that time expecting her confinement, was so overwhelmed by grief and horror at the news abruptly communicated to her, that shortly afterwards she gave premature birth to a son, who, perhaps happily, survived his father's death but a few hours. Eleanor is now in a most critical condition, and every moment which I devote to this letter is robbed from my melancholy watch by her bedside. Indeed I feel that Divine grace alone enables my weak frame to support the burden of anguish which has fallen upon me. Alas! I fear a terrible reaction; but it is my prayer that the same grace may sustain me till you return to enter worthily into the high and responsible position to which it has pleased God to elect you —truly His ways are inscrutable—and that I may be inspired with words of counsel and encouragement, which you will not disdain to accept from your mother. I care not then how soon I am permitted to join the beloved ones to whom my earthly happiness has been mainly due.

'My son, you are now in a direct line the last male representative of your race. Upon you devolves the old title which your brother and father, and their ancestors for generations, have borne so nobly.

'I remember that when, after that wretched episode which resulted in your retirement from the Guards, I urged so strenuously your departure for Australia, you accused me somewhat bitterly of having sacrificed the tenderness of motherhood upon the altar of family pride. Recollect that the Barrington motto, "Death rather than dishonour," has been the religion of my youth and of my old age; and that from my earliest childhood I was taught to reverence the name of Barrington as the type of truth and nobility.* From the hour of my marriage it became my holiest mission to preserve that name unsullied. Think then, what could have been my feelings when your extravagance and dissipated habits—I will use no harsher terms—threatened to disgrace it? Your English career was practically closed; there was no prospect but ruin before you; an unpleasant notoriety was attached to your name. I had faith in the latent manliness and energy in your character, which I felt might be developed by the impetus of a fresh opening in a distant land; and I believed that, once separated from the baleful influences that beset you in London, you might retrieve the past and carve out a new and honourable career.

---

* Lady Alice Clarence was, upon the female side, a cousin of her husband, Sir Lionel Barrington.

'Now, by the death of your brother and of his two sons, all the circumstances of your life are changed. To Sir Hardress Barrington society will readily pardon what it would have been slow to condone in the case of a penniless younger son. Come home at once. New interests and responsibilities await you. Meet them nobly, Should our dear Eleanor be taken from us, you will become the natural guardian of Lionel's daughter. Mr. Burnley tells me that your presence is urgently desirable. Lose not a day in taking your passage to England. Mr. Burnley is writing to you on matters of business. I will add no more except to assure you that you will be received with open arms, and that my prayers are with you.

'Your loving mother,
'ALICE BARRINGTON.'

Barrington smiled grimly as he refolded the letter.

'Le roi est mort, vive le roi,' he muttered. 'Poor mother! it is a bitter pill for her to swallow, but she takes it at a gulp. I was right; the family honour is her fetish. Lionel dead! I cannot realise it. I have always thought him a prig, but he was a downright good fellow when you pierced the crust, and we were fond of each other after a fashion. I think he would have liked me better if I had been a parson, and had settled down in the family living; and next to that he preferred me in Australia. . . . He was better fitted for the English county magnate business than I shall ever be. . . . My mother bows to the decrees of Providence, but she admits that they are inscrutable. What possible reason could the Almighty have had for mangling those poor children? It will be a hard nut for her faith to crack; but the title, such as it is, she fancies a sort of Apostolic unction. The head of the house of Barrington can do no wrong. . . . It is a queer world! I was a beggar yesterday, skulking about the Premier's back gate. I am a baronet to-day. Not that it will make any difference in Longleat's sentiments. . . . Poor little chaps!' he added, with a regretful pang at the thought of his nephew's bonnie faces—the urchins he had dandled on his knees at Castle Barrington and tipped at school. 'It is hard lines upon them that they should not have their innings. I don't think that I'd have grudged little Li the handle to his name. How will Honoria receive this news? No need to marry her now for the sake of the Tarrangella tin-mine. What will my mother say to the introduction of alien blood into the pure Barrington stream? Honoria is a Radical at heart. She will never worship at the ancestral shrine. . . . There's something in that girl that wakes the devil in me. Old Ferris was right, perhaps; the taint of the mother——'

He broke the thread of his thoughts by tearing open the lawyer's letter. Mr. Burnley briefly explained the circumstances of Sir Lionel's death, the disposition of his property, and concluded by strongly urging the necessity for Hardress's return to England, expressing a doubt as to the ultimate effect of the shock she had sustained upon the fragile constitution of Lady Alice Barrington.

'Her thoughts seem now entirely centred on you,' wrote the lawyer. 'Ever since your departure she has been consumed with feverish anxiety for news of you. Her grief for Sir Lionel is silent and repressed. You represent her earthly source of consolation. She said to me yesterday, "If I could only see my son Hardress happily married and taking his place worthily here, I should die in peace." You know your mother's reticence and unwillingness to own to any weakness; but I shrewdly suspect that remorse has weighed upon her ever since she advised your banishment to Australia.'

Barrington was deeply affected by these allusions to his mother. From his childhood this beautiful, undemonstrative woman had exercised a powerful though passive influence over his emotions. He had loved her, even when he had been bitter against her; and now a yearning came over him to see her, to gratify the proud expectations that she had once cherished of him. The grey walls of his old home rose in his mind, and awakened in it a keen longing to return. He breathed again the atmosphere in which he had been born and reared, and marvelled that he could have existed elsewhere. His thoughts went drifting back amid old scenes and companions—the men of his regiment, the women who had smiled upon him—would they be gracious to him once more?

And then his mind turned towards Honoria. He grew hot and cold: his breath rose and fell rapidly: his heart throbbed. It became borne in upon him that they two no longer stood upon the same footing. The shock of his sudden social elevation, and the influence of his mother's affectionate exhortation, and of the prayers and blessings breathed forth from her letter, seemed to have changed entirely his moral attitude towards the girl whom he at once loved and despised.

Yesterday, he had deemed it no sacrifice to make Honoria his wife. To-night, with the vision of his mother's sorrowful face fresh in his imagination — as he thought of her revived hopes for his future career; of the duties and responsibilities that now devolved upon him; of the broad Barrington acres; the refined society which had contributed to the pleasure of his old life; of the new existence opening before him, with its possibilities of great achievement and its certainty of social rehabilitation, in which marriage represented such an important feature—he trembled and wavered.

Was not the price to be paid for the joy of calling Honoria his own, heavier than, under the circumstances, could reasonably be demanded from him? The revenues of the great Tarrangella tin-mine were nothing to him now, and the advantages of a union with Miss Longleat were no longer patent.

Could he ask Lady Alice Barrington to open her arms to the daughter of a Radical bullock-driver? Was Honoria's mother such an ancestress as future Barringtons might acknowledge without shame?

A thousand times, No.

Then he reflected upon the manifold inconsistencies in Honoria's nature—her frankness and boldness pushed to the very verge of indiscretion; her scorn of conventionalities; her impatience of the dictates of her petty world; her thirst for experience; her susceptibility to argument and entreaty; her self-reliance and yet her proneness to be dominated by the passionate impulses of the moment; her freedom of speech, and a certain *abandon* of action and manner to be attributed to the influences which from her birth had surrounded her, but which, in the course of Barrington's experience, had never been combined with the traditional reserve of a carefully-trained young lady who may only be approached in the conventional manner sanctioned by polite society.

It had been arranged that they were to meet that evening at the usual trysting-place.

Could he venture to broach to her a plan of immediate flight? How far would it be possible to overcome her scruples—to gloss over dishonour by honied phrases and specious arguments—the imperative necessity for his return; the difficulty of triumphing over her father's opposition to his suit; the desirability of deferring the ceremony of marriage till they reached Sydney—England—the break from all old ties which would leave her untrammelled by the past. . . . Could he dare whisper in her ear promises of devotion, of lifelong fidelity—of marriage in the sight of God—the hackneyed jargon which rises so glibly to the lips of a fashionable profligate?

Barrington dined alone. He was in a queer, excited mood; yet 'mid all his excitement there ran the regretful thought of his mother's grief, of the sorrowing widow, of the dead boys.

He had been engaged in a vague way for that evening, but remained at the hotel, having a notion that it would be indecorous to show himself in general society. Below in the coffee-room there was a meeting of rowdies. He could hear rough voices raised in shouts and oaths and doggrel songs, in which the Premier's name resounded frequently. In two days the new Parliament was to be opened, and Leichardt's Town was rife with political agitation.

Without, in the street there was the roar of traffic; the cabs and jingles were flying to and fro, and the lights twinkled in the shop-windows, while the news-boys cried a late edition of the *Leichardt's Town Chronicle*, in which was the English intelligence.

Barrington bought a paper, and read a detailed account of the accident to the Scotch express.

It was as though he had been in a dream. He drank deep draughts of champagne, and every now and then would give himself a shake as if to convince himself that the tidings he had received were real.

The hours passed slowly, and the craving for Honoria's companionship became intense; it was more passionate than mere lover's longing to see and speak to the object beloved.

At last he took up his hat and went forth, shunning the thoroughfare, but passing through lonely streets, and loitering in an unfrequented quarter by the river till the hour for his love-meeting drew near.

CHAPTER VI.

IN PERIL.

BARRINGTON was in the Gardens by ten. The night was clear and moonlit, a trifle chill, as evenings in June are apt to be. He lit a cigar and strolled up and down beneath the bunya-trees, cursing below his breath Honoria's laggard steps, and watching the lights in the Premier's house which flickered in several windows, and at last became stationary only in those of Mr. Longleat's study.

He knew then that all but the master himself had retired.

Surely she was free now. Would she never come ?

He threw away the butt-end of his cigar as the clock in the Parliamentary Buildings struck the half-hour after eleven. Then he saw Honoria, her tall figure enveloped in a long dark cloak which did not conceal the graceful sweep of her shoulders, emerge cautiously, and in apparent uncertainty, from one of the venetianed windows, and steal round by the shrubbery, passing at length through the wicket-gate into the public-grounds.

He saw in the first glimpse of her face that she had undergone some agitating experience. It was very pale, and her dark eyes looked bright and feverish, while her lips seemed to tremble with sensibility. She uttered a deep sigh. The night was very still. Above their heads, the bamboos rustled ever so slightly : they might have heard a leaf fall.

'I thought that you were never coming,' whispered Barrington. 'Sweetest, what detained you? Did you know that I was here, waiting and counting the minutes till you appeared?'

'Yes, I knew that you were here. There was a gentleman dining with us, and I could not get away sooner. . . . Listen!' she went on, in a hurried discomposed manner, 'I do not feel like myself to-night. I have something to tell you. No, do not speak; let me have my say first. I think that we had better part—for a time at least—if not for always. I am so miserable. I feel so ill—so restless. It has come over me strongly that I am wrong to be with you here—that you make me wicked. I want to go back to my old life. I am under a spell. If we were parted, I could decide calmly whether I love you or not. I cannot do so now. . . . I have had a heavy dread upon me for days.

As I was stepping out, a voice seemed to whisper to me, "Stay!" All through dinner I seemed in a dream. I felt that something terrible was going to happen. Do you believe in spirits? Ever since Angela's death, I have fancied that she was in the air close to me, like a chill current freezing my blood when I thought of you. . . . And then I have imagined, and have heard other things. Hardress!' she exclaimed sharply, drawing herself away from him, 'did you—did you make Angela love you too?'

Barrington shrank as Honoria spoke. Since he heard that Angela was dead, he had tried deliberately to thrust the remembrance of her from his mind. After a moment's pause, he replied:

'My dearest, what has put that notion into your head?'

An anonymous letter was sent me yesterday. I threw it in the fire, but its words rankled in my mind. At first I thought that I would not tell you—and then— You know that I *must* trust you. Is it true?'

'Honoria!' said Barrington, in a constrained tone; 'even if I had never known *you*, I could not have connected the idea of love as between man and woman with that pure poetic child. The feeling I had for Angela—and it was deep in its way—was that tender affection which one so innocent and imaginative might well inspire. She was like a forest flower which blooms and fades, and which one could not pass without a delicate pleasure in its beauty and perfume. I have mourned for her. Do not sully her memory by such thoughts as these.'

'Forgive me!' murmured Honoria. 'I have been sorry too,' she added. 'I have reproached myself because I did not understand her. It is thinking of her—of her father's grief—Aunt Pen says that he is as a man gone mad: he will not speak, but sits all day long by her grave—which has turned my heart towards *my* father—away from you. Forgive me if I wronged you. I *wished* to think evil of you. I wanted to have a reason for hating you.'

'What has your father been saying to you?' asked Barrington. 'Why have you changed?'

'He has said nothing,' answered Honoria. 'For weeks we have been estranged; we have never mentioned your name. But to-night there was something odd and sad in his manner. He kept eyeing me with a kind of wistful tenderness; and my heart yearned to him. It was as though our souls were trying to speak, and could not. Only when he bade me good-night he said, "Honie, don't let anything come between us." And I could have fallen upon his neck, and told him that

I was bad, and that I hated myself, and begged him to keep me beside him and not let me go out to-night. And then I would have implored him to take me away to some strange place, where we might forget, and learn to love each other. I felt that I had seemed proud and indifferent. Men are not like women. I ought not to have judged him. Perhaps if I had not been cold he would not have gone away to that other woman. But I could not speak, and it was too late. Oh, Hardress, release me; give me time. Hardress, let me go; don't make me come out any more like this. I cannot—I cannot!'

It was a new Honoria who gasped out the broken sentences, clinging to him with hot, nervous fingers, that when they touched his neck thrilled him with passionate excitement. As she made her wild appeal she gazed at him with wide-open eyes, half-terrified, half-imploring, and wound her head back as though she were struggling against the spell which bound her.

'Why do you fight so hard against what is your fate?' he said, in a tone at once imploring and caressing. 'You came out to-night because you love me. Is love so terrible a crime? Is it not a joy, rather than a torment? Your scruples, dearest one, are natural, to a daughter, but, believe me, they are unreasonable; and knowing your heart as I do, how could I yield to them?'

'You *will* misunderstand me,' exclaimed Honoria. 'It is not only for my father's sake that I wish to be free, but because I distrust my own feelings. I want to go away, to Sydney, Tasmania—anywhere so that you do not follow me, and so that I can think calmly. . . . This thought was in my mind to-night, and many others; and when my father looked at me so, I had almost determined to tell him everything, to implore him to take me away. . . . And then a clerk from the Treasury came to see him, and they both went into his study. . . . I waited and waited, and all the time I knew that you were outside, and my heart was beating, and I felt sick and faint. I wanted to stay indoors, and yet something stronger than myself seemed to draw me to you. . . . And I grew frightened. At last I could not bear it. I put on my cloak, and said to myself that I would tell you everything, and implore you to release me. I will marry you by-and-by, perhaps, but not now—not for a long time. . . . And I think that I am going mad. I do not sleep at night; and everywhere I see your eyes, like those of a fiend, haunting me. I do not know whether I love or hate or dread you most. . . . Oh! don't look at me like that. Don't, don't! you frighten me. Let me go.'

He unloosed his arms and stood silently facing her. There was an evil expression in his eyes, from which, without knowing the cause, she instinctively shrank.

'I tell you that I am afraid of you,' she said; 'I want to go back. There is something strange about you to-night. Oh, I wish that I had stayed at home!'

'Honoria,' said Barrington, gravely, 'do you wish to take back your promise? Do you mean to throw me over?'

'No, no; I only ask you to be generous. You have made me your slave; I do not know how—but I am afraid of you. Give me back my liberty. If I love you, let me love of my free-will. Go away from me. At least go back to Dyraaba.'

'You can have little faith in my love,' said Barrington, 'if you think that I can give you up so calmly. You have led me too far, and now I cannot let you draw back. I will have you for my own, not in an indefinite future, but now. I am going away indeed, but not to Dyraaba. I shall never go back to Dyraaba again. I have had news from home to-day, and I am half miserable and half joyful. I am a wretch for feeling so. All my people are in great grief. My brother and his two sons are dead. I am a rich man. My mother writes beseeching me to return at once. I want to read you what she says. I want to show you the lawyer's letter ; you will then see that there is no choice left us. It is necessary that I should leave Leichardt's Land—that you should become mine at once. Your father's consent is nothing. What sane man could consider his objection to me reasonable ? You must come to England with me.'

'Your brother dead,' said Honoria, vaguely. 'You are going to England.'

She was silent for a moment, looking at

him as though she barely followed the drift of his words; yet comprehending that their relations towards each other had changed.

'Hush!' she whispered, suddenly clutching his arm. 'Do you not hear a noise? There is a man listening behind the bamboos. I am certain of it; I heard a footstep. Oh, let us go away from here!'

And indeed there was a sound of retreating feet crushing the dry bamboo leaves that strewed the ground.

'My love,' said Barrington, 'this is the most retired part of the gardens, but we cannot guard against intrusion. It would be fatal if you were recognised; and you are unveiled.'

Honoria trembled violently, nevertheless spoke with some of her old imperious air.

'It is not because I am ashamed,' she

said, 'but that I am afraid—and afraid of what? I don't know—of you. Go on. I don't understand what you were saying. Tell me again. Your brother is dead, and you are going away. What do you wish me to do?'

'How can I talk to you here?' asked Barrington. 'Would you have our confidences reported all over Leichardt's Town to-morrow? You must come with me to my rooms. I have lodgings in a quiet part of Leichardt's Town. You will go and return unperceived; and there we can speak of our future. We can decide our plans without fear of being seen or overheard. Everything is changed with me. You must read Burnley's letter. You must hear what my mother says to me. You see that it is a most important matter. Your future and mine depend upon your decision. Honoria, you must do as I bid you. When you have heard everything, you may weigh all the considerations calmly, but you owe me obedience now.'

'Go with you to your rooms. I could not. What would people think or say? No, no. Can you not write to me? Oh, I am certain that I heard footsteps again. Let me go back. I shall be able to think to-morrow. To-night I am frightened, unnerved.'

'To-morrow will be too late,' said Barrington. 'Come! I only ask you for an hour. I will bring you back to this spot. It is not like you to be deterred from doing what is desirable—nay, necessary—by a mere conventional scruple. There would be no impropriety in your going to my lodgings if Mrs. Ferris were with you. Can you not trust me to take care of you?'

'Yes, but I am alone. How can I go with you to a strange place? at this hour—it is impossible!'

'You did not hesitate to meet me here,' he urged, 'why should you object to spending an hour with me in my temporary home, where you will be as safe as in your own? Honoria, you are above these petty considerations. There is a cab waiting at the south gate. I tell you that I *must* speak to you alone. Do you not see that this news has changed my whole life — that you must decide at once whether you will be my wife or not?'

He drew her on for a few steps, while she weakly resisted his entreaties.

His longing impelled him almost beyond the bounds of self-control. He was conscious only of the overmastering desire to have her to himself. Those soft shadows which the moon threw upon her cheek and brow mocked and bewitched his excited fancy. . . . And she, too, seemed borne along upon the tide of his passion.

'I am obliged to do what you bid me,' said

Honoria, submissively. 'You are my master, and I cannot resist—I *must* obey you. I know that my better nature shrinks from you, and yet I cling to you. Hardress, why should I not trust you—why should I fear you?'

The appeal in her tone stifled for a moment the vague impulses in Barrington's breast, which had as yet hardly shaped themselves into a definite design.

'Come!' he said; 'have I not said that I have ever been loyal to the women who trusted me?'

He folded her mantle more closely round her, playfully chided her for inattention to her disguise, and placed her hand upon his arm in a calm protecting manner, which, contrasted with his former excitement, gave her new confidence and soothed her agitation.

Thus they walked down beneath the bunya

trees to the south gate of the Gardens, where a closed carriage was awaiting them.

Honoria shrank back again with involuntary repugnance to the thought that she was the victim of a deliberate scheme of coercion.

'You had planned that I should come,' she exclaimed.

'A lover who would win his cause must be prepared at all points,' said Barrington, lightly. 'I trusted in your good sense and in my persuasions to overcome your scruples. I knew that our conversation was too important to bear the risk of interruption. The nights are very cold, dearest; and I have some regard for your health and comfort.'

She allowed him to help her into the carriage, and shivered as she cowered into the farthest corner. Barrington gave an order to the driver, and they were whirled along past King Street, with its many lights and buzz of traffic, into a darker region, where the carriage paused before one of a row of houses facing the river.

Barrington descended, spoke to the coachman, then with a latch-key opened the door to admit Honoria, who hurriedly alighted, and, fancying that she perceived two dark figures standing in the shadow of a neighbouring building, clung to Hardress for protection and concealment.

She found herself in a dim passage, lighted by a lamp suspended from the ceiling, and with closed doors upon one side. Once within, she breathed more freely. Barrington led Honoria upstairs into a sitting-room comfortably furnished, and with a bright fire burning upon the hearth.

'You see that you are perfectly safe and infinitely warmer here than beneath the bamboos,' he said lightly. 'My landlady is sleeping the slumber of the just below stairs, and you will depart as quietly as you have entered. Let me draw your chair closer to the fire, and relieve you of your cloak. Your fingers are numbed with cold.'

His air of commonplace solicitude, the warmth and absence of melodramatic effect in his language or in their surroundings, dispelled Honoria's vague fears, and made her almost ashamed of her former weakness. There was, too, a certain piquancy in the situation which appealed to her love of adventure, and she looked about her with interest and animation.

'Forgive the disorder of my bachelor apartments,' said Barrington, removing a pipe from the table at her elbow. 'That is a view of Castle Barrington, and this is a likeness of my mother,' he added, seeing that her eyes wandered towards the photographs upon the mantelshelf.

Honoria examined the portrait attentively.

'How beautiful she is! how noble! . . . Your mother—and I—oh, if I could have had such a mother as this! Hardress, it is best indeed that we should part. Your people are not as my people, and my life has not fitted me for yours.'

He was silent. At that moment he dared not reply.

She gazed thoughtfully into the fire, her face bent forward, her hand supporting her chin. He stood opposite, watching her. Presently she turned and met his eyes.

'You look strange — troubled. It is thoughtless of me to forget that you have had bad news to-day. You are sorry for your brother's death. You said that you had a great deal to tell me. Say it now. I am not as nervous as I was. I will try to think calmly, and then I will decide. Tell me all that has happened—what you wish me to do.'

With forced composure Barrington began his tale, and related at length the tidings he had received that afternoon. He did not affect any great grief at the death of his brother, between whom and himself there had never been much sympathy; but the tone of genuine regret in which he spoke of his nephews and of his widowed sister-in-law touched Honoria's feelings, and convinced her of his sincerity. He talked of his mother and of her longing for his return; he read her the lawyer's letter, and a part of that from Lady Alice Barrington. Then his voice faltered, and in eager tones he painted the life they would lead in England, Italy—wherever it should please her to dwell. He poured forth assurances of his unfailing love, and vague protestations, the drift of which she did not at once comprehend. . . . He passionately besought her to leave Leichardt's Land with him upon the morrow.

* * * * *

CHAPTER VII.

SAVED.

HALF-PAST one.

As the bell in the Parliamentary Buildings boomed the single stroke, a woman's cry, shrill and sharp, echoed through the deserted thoroughfare in which Barrington's rooms were situated. The policeman watching at the corner of King Street had been attracted from his post by a row in a neighbouring public-house; and the street being quiet and eminently respectable, was not a likely resort for night loiterers. Thus, either the sound was not heard, or none cared to inquire into its origin.

Presently the door of Barrington's house was hurriedly opened, and Honoria Longleat herself, bareheaded, uncloaked, with wide-open terrified eyes and panic-stricken features, rushed forth into the street, and gazed helplessly around, not knowing where to turn for protection against some terrible and hitherto unimagined peril.

Before her at the distance of several hundred yards lay the river, with the long shadows and dimly-reflected lights upon its glassy surface, its banks bordered by low sheds that promised no effectual security. Honoria fled across the road, and cowered for a minute under the roof of one of these, unaware that Barrington, who had followed her from the house, was close beside her.

He approached, holding out his hand with a gesture of remonstrance. She uttered a faint cry, and flung herself away from him.

'Let me go home! Do not speak to me! How dare you come near me!'

'Honoria!' he said, 'for God's sake command yourself! Put on your cloak and be silent. I entreat you have some regard for your reputation. You are labouring under an extraordinary delusion. You have misunderstood my proposal. You need not fear me. Come back, and listen to me calmly, or at least let me take you home.

'Don't come near me!' she said again in a fierce whisper. 'I am not wholly your slave. I can defy you! You spoke too plainly for me to misunderstand your meaning. Every word that you utter is an insult. Stop that cab, and let me get into it.'

A hansom was being driven unsteadily along the road. Barrington stepped forward and hailed it. He placed Honoria's cloak, which he had carried, upon her shoulders. She wrapped it round her, covering her head and half concealing her face, which was rigid with scorn, horror, and wrath.

Disdaining his arm, she got into the cab without a word. Barrington bade the man drive to the south gate of the Gardens, and was about to enter after her, but she leaned forward and said in that low unnatural voice, of which every word seemed to stab him like a knife:

'You shall not come with me. I will never see or speak to you again. I think that I could kill you at this moment for what you have dared to say to me. All my love is hate. Go!'

'Honoria,' said Barrington, 'I repeat that you have misunderstood me. This is not a time to enter into explanations. I implore you, for your own sake, be silent now. If you are recognised you are lost. I am bound to protect you against yourself. I *must* take you to the Gardens. I will neither look at you nor speak to you, since my presence is so distasteful, but go with you I will.'

Too weak to struggle further, she allowed him to place himself beside her, and each drew apart from the other: she with her profile turned away from him, shuddering irrepressibly; and he, all his passion sobered cursing himself for his madness, not daring to address her.

The driver, who was in a state of semi-intoxication, had not thoroughly comprehended his orders, and instead of taking a straight course on by the river, turned up King Street, and drove at a break-neck pace through the lighted crowded thoroughfare, where, as the cab swayed unsteadily from side to side, the danger of a collision seemed imminent.

'Slower,' shouted Barrington. 'You are going wrong. Drive down Charles Street, and along to the Emu Point Ferry. There will be an accident if you are not careful.'

But the adjuration proved of no avail. The cabman gave a drunken nod, and did not abate his reckless pace. Fearful of attracting observation to his companion, Barrington drew back into the cab, and submitted to the inevitable. They turned abruptly into another street, and taking the wrong side of the road, came into violent contact with a vehicle going in another direction. There was a confused sound of ejaculations and oaths, of grating wheels and plunging horses.

Barrington's hansom received most injury; it overturned; the driver was hurled on to the footpath, and the other two occupants flung together into the street.

Honoria had fallen upon her companion. The shock was great, and, though actually unhurt, she lay for a moment dizzy and half-unconscious. Then a hand grasped her arm and helped her to rise, and a voice she knew, uttered in low dismayed tones:

'Honoria!'

She tottered to her feet. Dyson Maddox and Corny Cathcart stood facing her. Both looked amazed—horror-stricken. There was no possibility of concealing her identity had she had presence of mind to attempt doing so. Her cloak had dropped from her head, and the light of a neighbouring lamp shone full upon her face, still wearing that indefinable expression of terror which had fallen upon it when she fled from the place where she had had her interview with Barrington.

In her bewilderment she had almost forgotten what had happened to her, and hardly realised the shame of her position, or the fact that Dyson and Cathcart had jumped from the cab with which her own had come into collision. Then her eyes fell upon Barrington's prostrate figure as he lay stunned beside her. The horror and loathing returned with fresh force. She darted towards Dyson and clutched his hand.

'Take me away!' she cried 'Save me! Take me away!'

A little crowd had begun to assemble round the scene of the accident. Honoria had recovered sufficient self-possession to shroud herself anew in her cloak.

'Oh, don't let these people see me!' she whispered imploringly, clinging to Dyson as though he had been an angelic protector.

He led her on almost roughly, away from the light and clear of the throng, and stopping a cab which was driving slowly up, placed her in it.

She covered her face, and with a deep quivering sigh drew back as well as she could into the obscurity of the carriage. Dyson bade the driver wait, and returned to the spot where Cathcart and one of the bystanders were lifting Barrington from the ground. The latter had struck his head against the wheel, and blood flowed from a gash upon his forehead; his eyes were closed, and he was still unconscious.

'Corny,' said Dyson, aside, to his manager, 'I am going to take her home; whatever happens I can trust you to shield her name. God knows what it all means! You had better take that villain to an hotel, and send for a doctor.'

He returned to Honoria.

'I will take you home,' he said gently. 'Do not be frightened! You are safe with me.'

'No one must see me,' she cried wildly. 'I cannot—I cannot bear it. Tell him to drive to the south entrance of the Gardens, and you will take me to the little gate. That was how I came out. Then I shall be safe.'

Dyson gave the necessary directions, and they were driven through quiet streets, past the Emu Point Ferry, till they reached the large iron gates, a little way below the Premier's house.

He then dismissed the cab and offered Honoria his arm. She was shaking with suppressed sobs that were in danger of becoming hysterical. When they were in the Gardens and had reached the shelter of the bamboos, she fairly gave way, and, leaning against a tree, covered her face and wept bitterly.

Dyson stood by, listening in deep distress to the incoherent words which broke from her lips, and which seemed to tell of insult and disgrace. All his manhood stirred in furious wrath against Barrington, who had dared to place her in a position so compromising. That she had been imprudent—that she had laid herself open to insult he feared; but his faith in her never wavered.

'Honoria,' he said in tones of the deepest tenderness, ‘oh, don’t cry so. I cannot bear to hear your sobs. No one, nothing shall hurt you now. I am your brother; remember that, dear. You are safe with me. Tell me what you please. Trust me unreservedly. I want nothing in the world except to serve you, to comfort you, to avenge you. Oh, my darling, don’t cry! Be brave and speak, and tell me the truth.’

Honoria caught his hand and looked into his face with eyes as searching and faithful as those of a dog. Her need was so great that all other scruples fell before it.

‘I don’t want to be avenged,’ she said very low. I only want to sink into the earth so that my face shall be never seen any more. I have been—insulted. I—I would speak, but it shames me—only it is right that you should know. He thought I was a wicked woman—he—said—— Oh, I would die rather than that my father should know . . .’

'Great God!' said Dyson. 'Don't torture me, Honoria. . . . I can believe no evil of you—and yet your words, your looks, convey horrible suspicions. . . . Oh, tell me everything. Speak to me as though I were your mother—your brother.'

A shudder passed through Honoria's frame, but her words had failed her. She stared beyond him, as it were, with her great wild eyes, still clinging convulsively to his hand.

'Honoria!' said Dyson. 'I implore you to tell me. There's no one can help you as I can. Speak—never mind; don't be afraid, Honoria.'

'I will tell you,' she said, almost in a whisper. 'I have no one—no one but you. . . . I will try to trust you. . . . it seems as if I could have no more faith in anyone—as if all the world must be bad. . . . I did not know that there were things so terrible. I did not think that wrong could ever come near me.

. . . . I was angry when you said, long ago, that I played with fire. . . . And then a veil seemed taken off my soul, and I saw myself —I, who had been so proud—and I saw that he was infamous. . . . *That* was what I believed to be love. I did not know why I shrank—I struggled, and then I yielded ; I wished to be true. . . . And all the time he had wicked thoughts. . . He would have married me for my money . . . but now his brother is dead and he is rich, money is nothing to him. . . . And to-night the mask fell ; it was like a hideous revelation—of him, of myself. He said that circumstances were changed with him—that it would break his mother's heart if he married me. . . . He said that I must go away with him and begin a new life. At first I did not understand—and then I knew. . . . He said I should be his wife before God. . . . I . . oh, now you know. . . . And while he spoke I became cold, and the horror grew upon me, and I ran from the room, away—I did not care where. . . . But he would go with me in the cab—and then the accident happened, and you came . . . .'

She paused for a moment, her bosom heaving; and Dyson said nothing, only hanging in breathless anxiety upon her broken words.

'It was as though I had awakened from a dream—awakened to find myself upon the brink of a precipice. From the first he made me do things that I did not wish. I thought that he was different to other people; I *was* playing with fire; I was bold and unmaidenly. I thought no harm could come to me. My life seemed so flat—and I wanted something new. I was craving after excitement of some sort . . . But it was not that I was wicked altogether. I only knew dimly; I did not think of wrong. I trusted him to be loyal as you—as Australian men are loyal—it is the English who are false, who have bad thoughts. . . . I did not think that there was any more harm in meeting him in the Gardens at night, than in walking with him by the lagoon at Kooralbyn. I was obliged to do what he wished; he made me obey him. . . . I fancied that I loved him; I was fascinated; I had no will. It was the evil eye—it was infatuation. You cannot understand, for you do not believe in such things. . . . I came out here almost every evening when the rest were in bed. And to-night he made me go with him to his lodgings.'

Dyson uttered a hoarse exclamation of horror.

'Honoria! you were mad.'

'He made me,' she said, with almost child-like simplicity. 'I did not want to go at first—I struggled—but he was stronger than

I. His brother is dead; he said that he must go to England. He said that he had important things to tell me. . . . And I went; and then——'

She fell again into a fit of shuddering.

Dyson pressed her hand without speaking. After a few moments she went on, taking up her story brokenly, following the sequence of her thoughts.

'Often I have not known whether I was miserable or happy. It was like a dream in which there was a kind of wicked joy and then hatred and disgust. . . . If you had tried at first—if anyone had told me what it really meant—if I had known—I would have resisted—I would not have allowed him to master me; but I thought that at last I was going to have feelings like the women in books—who lead tumultuous lives, who have great passions—with whom existence is not mere stagnation; and I liked my blood to be stirred. I had no mother; no one to warn me. And I revolted against my father—I despised him, and was bitter—I thought that there could be nothing in common between us—that he less than anyone could understand what was in my heart.'

'God help you, poor child!' uttered Dyson. And in the midst of his intense pity, of his anger and sorrow, a deep joy took possession of his soul. The way in which she clung to him, her manner of looking and speaking, made him feel that she had set him apart from other men. Her weakness and broken confession seemed to bring her nearer to him.

He took her hand and led her along the dim road beneath the shadowy bamboos. They were joined and yet asunder. In his manner there was a chivalrous, silent sympathy, which encouraged her to speak on, with an imploring dependence in her tone.

'It seems so long ago,' she murmured; 'and I have changed, as it were, all in a moment. And yet if he were near me, I should be afraid. Oh!' she cried, 'you will keep him from me; you won't forsake me! Say that you will not let people think ill of me!'

'I wish for nothing except to serve you,' repeated Dyson again. 'You must never see or speak to him any more. . . . It has been a bitter ordeal for you, but you will pass through it, and you will be nobler and wiser. You may know real happiness. You may know the love which reverences its object.' He paused, fearful lest the tremor in his voice should betray him. 'You will forget all this,' he added. 'It is as you say, a bad dream. The morning light will drive it away. Our lives have some meaning deeper than the mere longing for passionate experience, and you will learn it in time.'

His words seemed to soothe and elevate her troubled soul. She grew calmer, and, as they walked hand-in-hand, a feeling of peace and security crept over her, as though, after passing through stormy waters, she had reached a haven.

They paused at the little gate.

'I came out this way,' she said. 'You must not come further. Do not ever speak of this again. Do not remind me, by look or word, that I have been humiliated so. I cannot bear it. I must bury it, all the thought of it, in my own heart, and never lay it bare, except when I want to remind myself how good you have been to-night.' She glanced up at him with a sudden grateful look. 'And *he* is going away,' she went on; 'his brother is dead. He will not remain in Australia. That is the only comfort—that he will not stay; that he cannot make me remember always that I have been disgraced. . . . If I ever loved him, I will fight against my love; I will think only of the horror and the loathing; I will pray to be delivered from the infatuation. . . . I will try to be better in all ways. . . . You will not say,' she went on in a questioning undertone, 'that I ought to tell my father? I could not do it. I could not bear that he should know.'

'No, no,' said Dyson; 'what end would the telling him serve? Try and think of this humiliation as a trial which was needed to make you strong.'

She looked at him as she stood with her hand upon the gate, and the tears gathered in her eyes.

'You do not altogether despise me?'

'Oh, do not ask that,' exclaimed Dyson, impetuously, 'when my life is yours; when you know that I have no impulse but to honour you.' He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it with chivalrous respect. 'Remember,' he said, 'that I am your brother. You may trust me unreservedly. You must go home,' he added. 'Do not linger. I will watch here till you are safe within. God keep you, my dear!'

She obeyed him without further word. Her tall, dark figure disappeared for a minute among the trees, then became distinct again upon the verandah, and finally passed in through the French window of her bedroom.

CHAPTER VIII.

SINISTER OMENS.

UPON the morning after Honoria's midnight adventure, the Premier received the following letter:

'Adams's Hotel,
'South Leichard's Town.

'MY FRIEND,

'It is surely impossible that you could have been aware, yesterday, that my husband was on his way down from the north. This afternoon I returned home suspecting nothing, and found him with a letter you had sent me in his hand. Were you mad to write what has compromised me so utterly? Yet I am almost glad that the farce has ended, and that now I may fling off my legalised degradation and face the world defiantly. To-night I have left my husband's house for ever. I have told no one where I have gone. I wish for a little while, at least, to be at peace. I have private rooms in this quiet inn where the landlady was formerly a servant of my father's, so that I am not likely to be annoyed by impertinent observation.

'Do not come to me to-morrow or the next day. On the third day I will see you.

'Adieu,

'C. V.'

Longleat eagerly read the letter, to receive which, was indeed a relief, after the tortures of anxiety he had been enduring, then passionately pressed the flimsy paper to his lips. He had passed a wakeful night, spent in alternately pacing the floor of his study, in vain efforts at composition and in brooding over the wood fire, which, as he bent forward now, cast fitful gleams upon his massive face, haggard with watching and suspense.

He had exercised sufficient self-control to refrain from crossing the water and reconnoitring the cottage at Emu Point; but imagination picturing Mrs. Vallancy the victim to her husband's jealous fury, goaded his longing and compassion into a fierce rage difficult to support in this state of forced inaction.

It is impossible to credit Longleat with the possession of many moral and religious scruples, nevertheless his hidden sin had haunted him for months like a condemning spirit. At first his compunction had chiefly arisen from a sense of contamination in the connection between Mrs. Vallancy and his daughter; but as gradually his passion gained the mastery over his purer instincts, his consciousness of wrong intent lessened, and his love for Honoria became slowly numbed by the misconception between them, and the influence of his miserable infatuation. Now that the crisis had arrived, there rose in his mind a fierce exultation in the tearing away of secrecy and restraint, while more strongly than ever the feeling of personal predominance and revolt against the established order of things, made him glory in defying the dictates of society.

He was not troubled by qualms as to Vallancy's proceedings. The latter was a cur and a bully, and deserved neither fear nor consideration. The abstract equity of the question did not weigh with him. A prize which one man misuses, another has clearly a right to appropriate, providing the final intention be righteous; and in the moral justice of his determination to marry Mrs. Vallancy, Longleat had the fullest confidence.

The messenger who had brought the letter had received orders to wait. Longleat dashed off an incoherent reply, promising to respect Connie's wish for solitude, for that day at least; but imploring permission to call at Adams's after the opening of the House on the morrow.

As he was folding up the letter a thought struck him, and he hastily filled in a cheque for a hundred pounds, enclosed it, and sealed the envelope with his signet-ring.

Upon that morning Parliament was to assemble, preliminary to the formal opening upon the morrow for the choice of the Speaker, and afterwards the Premier had a political engagement at Kooya which would detain him till late that evening. When his letter to Mrs. Vallancy was despatched, he washed, shaved, and changed his clothes, presenting, when he emerged from his dressing-room, more of his old, prosperous, self-assertive look than he had worn for weeks. The consciousness of power was strong within him that day; suspense was lulled; and he felt confident that political triumph would smile upon him on the morrow.

He breakfasted alone, making an inquiry from the servant after his daughter, who was reported to be still sleeping; he then hurried off to keep an appointment with one of his colleagues.

All the morning Honoria lay in a darkened room, crushed so low with humiliation that it seemed impossible for her ever again to face the light of day. Her agony was all the keener because, in spite of her outraged pride and fierce indignation, she could not repress an intense longing to know whether Barrington had suffered any injury from the accident which had befallen them the night before.

She got up and dressed at last, but would not quit her chamber, and gave orders that she was to be denied to any visitors who might ask for her.

When, about mid-day, Maddox called at The Bunyas, he was told that Miss Longleat could see no one.

During the day she was tormented by a restless dread that Barrington would seek her presence. The fear was groundless; he did not come. Then terror gave place to vague disappointment, and disappointment to alarm.

A terrible dreariness crept over her. She longed for the sight of Aunt Penelope's placid countenance, and the sound of her gurgling platitudes. Even Mr. Ferris's society would not at that moment have been unwelcome. Oh to take up the old turbid current of her existence, when, if boredom was unpleasant, it meant at least safety! She had been launched upon an unknown sea, and her own surging desires and impetuous impulses were the waves in which she had been engulphed.

She covered her face with her hands.

'Oh, Dyson, Dyson!' she murmured, 'I wish we were together again quietly at Kooralbyn. I think we could be happy now, if *he* would let me be; but it is too late, and I cannot—I don't know what to do. Oh, I don't know what to do!'

Suddenly she remembered what 'mid her inward excitement had been quite forgotten, that upon the morrow the new Parliament of Leichardt's Land would be opened, and the Premier's triumph or defeat assured.

'I cannot be there!' she exclaimed, with passionate horror. 'Oh, I cannot—I cannot!'

There seemed that afternoon an unnatural stillness in the atmosphere which surrounded The Bunyas. No visitor rang at the door-bell, or entered by the garden-gate, as was the custom of intimate friends. The distant sounds which floated down from the Parliamentary Buildings, telling of preparations for the ceremony of the morrow, seemed to Honoria's excited imagination like presages of doom.

Nor was she alone in her forebodings. Though the appointment of the Speaker had gone in favour of the Government, even with the outside world auguries of evil were rife. The Leader of the Opposition had spent part of the morning in earnest conclave with the chiefs of his party. There were in his manner signs of exultation which could not be mistaken. Mysterious telegrams had been sent to Western Australia, and still more mysterious replies received. Early in the day a despatch in cipher had been wired by the ex-Attorney-General to a certain lawyer in England.

In the afternoon Middleton and Vallancy were seen walking arm-in-arm down King Street. It was whispered that Mrs. Vallancy had fled from her husband's roof, and that a terrible revelation of former misdeeds was hanging over the head of the Premier.

But of all those most directly interested in the impending disaster Dyson Maddox was perhaps least conscious of its imminence or of its real nature. His mind was completely occupied with thoughts of Honoria—of how he could best screen her from the results of her imprudence, and prevent the true facts of the case from transpiring. He went through his usual routine of work, and transacted his official business as though he had been in a dream. He was ostensibly occupied with the viceregal speech, but in reality exercising his brain upon the problem of Honoria's infatuation for Barrington, when Cornelius Cathcart entered the office.

‘Have you seen or heard anything of Miss Longleat to-day?’ he asked eagerly.

Dyson shook his head.

‘I called at The Bunyas, but was told that Miss Longleat was not well enough to see anyone,’ he replied.

‘That blackguard is in a bad way,’ continued Cathcart. ‘The doctors say it is concussion of the brain. I hope he may never recover. Have you looked at the English papers yet? There is in the “Home News” an account of the death of Sir Lionel Barrington and of his two sons. This fellow has succeeded to the baronetcy. Now all Leichardt’s Town is ringing with the news, and with the story of the accident of last night, though as yet *her* name has not been mentioned in the affair. Good God, Dyson! it is a worse business than I thought. Do you know that they had been together at his lodgings—that she was driving away from there with him at two o'clock this morning?'

Dyson's lips were grimly set; he nodded silently. After a pause he said:

'I know it. Last night in her misery and shame at the insult which had been offered her she told me everything. He had acquired an influence over her which to me seems incomprehensible; he persuaded her to meet him clandestinely in the Gardens; he decoyed her to his rooms under pretence of having something important to tell her. Cathcart, remember that she is motherless, and that there was no one to teach her the meaning of evil. And that d——d villain played upon her innocence. In his poverty he would have married her gladly, but in his prosperity he did not deem her worthy to be his wife. He dared to propose to her that she should accompany him to England. . . . God! I could have killed him. . . . She is pure as an angel. Her anguish, her outraged pride were terrible to witness. Do not allude to this again. I could have spoken to no one but you—not to you if you had not been with me last night. You know what she was to me—what I must feel. I wonder that I have kept my hands from *his* throat.'

'You will avoid making a scandal,' said Cathcart; 'that would be fatal. The only safety for her is in hushing the matter up. Yet,' he added, 'sooner or later the affair will be known; these things always leak out. It is more than likely that some one recognised her, and there are many evil tongues in Leichardt's Town. Think if anyone but ourselves had been in that cab! I am not sure that it would not be wisest to go straight to the Premier, and make a clean breast of the whole thing. He is powerful enough to protect his daughter.'

'No,' said Dyson, firmly. 'She wishes that her father should be kept in ignorance. Can you not understand how she would shrink from any disclosure to him. At any cost the affair must be hushed, denied, disproved. To-morrow she must show herself at the Opening as though nothing had happened; and after this week it would be well that she should go away for a time, to Melbourne or Tasmania. I have thought the matter out. This is the only course. You and I, Corny, must protect her.'

Cathcart wriggled out of his chair, and made a furious onslaught upon the fire.

'I cannot stand it,' he said presently. 'I shall start for Barramunda the first thing to-morrow. I have been skulking about King Street all the morning, expecting at each corner to hear her name spoken. There is something in the air. I see men nudging each other and whispering mysteriously in the hotel verandahs. I am told that there is a plot brewing amongst the Oppositionists—a charge to be brought against the Premier when the House meets.'

Dyson smiled disdainfully.

'They will try to make capital out of Vallancy's appointment to Gundaroo. We have run the gauntlet of that already. If ever there were a man certain of success it is Longleat—but my brain is in a whirl to-day; I cannot think of political matters. I have to see Little at three—it is that time now.'

'You will be at the dinner to-night,' said Cathcart.

'Yes; we must both be there, ready to give the lie if Honoria is mentioned in connection with last night's occurrence.'

'There is a rumour afloat that Mrs. Vallancy has run away with the Premier.'

'Pshaw!' replied Dyson. 'At this moment Longleat is addressing a meeting of navvies at Kooya.'

'You don't believe in that scandal, then?'

'It is too obvious to be doubted,' replied Dyson, shortly. 'That is Little's knock. I will say good-bye for the present. We shall meet this evening.'

Cathcart withdrew, and the Attorney-General entered.

CHAPTER IX.

THE DINNER TO GENERAL COMPTON.

THE dinner which the Governor had mentioned to Mr. Longleat, and which was given to General Compton, a certain military officer who had come out from England upon a tour of inspection of the Australian defences, took place that evening.

It was an entirely informal banquet. The hosts were half a dozen of the 'best' men in Leichardt's Land, who had in their youth been acquainted with General Compton, and wished to do him honour before his departure from Australia. These gentlemen might have been pointed out as representing an especial type of colonist. They were cadets of noble families, who having emigrated early in life, combined the hereditary instincts of race with the practical wisdom of the colonial squatter, and embodied the truest Conservatism to be found in Australia.

The position which they held was neutral, and entirely independent of monetary or political prestige. They rather disdained the strife of parties, and had they entered the arena would probably have withdrawn from it, disgusted by the petty contention of conflicting personal interests; yet their influence, though passive, was powerful, and it may be said went far towards preserving the balance of power in an undisciplined community.

The dinner had been carefully composed, and was well served in the principal dining-room of the club. Colonel Augmering, in a strictly social capacity, presided. He was delighted to escape from the shackles of viceregal etiquette, and by no means regretted that the Premier's absence precluded the introduction of any political element into the convivial gathering. The company was entirely to his taste, and Lady Georgina's eagle eye did not rule the repast.

General Compton was placed upon the Governor's right. He was erect and distinguished-looking, with fine eyes, regular features, and a high-bred utterance. He had divided with Barrington the honours of the season; had not been remiss in his attentions to Miss Longleat; and though report proclaimed him a married man, he contrived to keep his wife in the background and to retain the prestige of a bachelor. He was a *bon vivant*, a good story-teller, an admirer of the fair sex; and when, as upon occasions like the present, he was enabled to relax the rigid conventionality necessary to the maintenance of his military dignity, he displayed a tendency to *double entendre.*

The other guests, with one or two exceptions, notably in the cases of Dyson Maddox and Cornelius Cathcart, were men of European proclivities, bearing the stamp of cities curiously blended with the rude traces of bush life. The only discordant element in the party presented itself in the shape of Mr. Vallancy, who, in virtue of a quasi-cousinship, had been invited at the last moment out of compliment to General Compton, and who was manifestly unwelcome to several of the gentlemen present.

He had come, fancying that Longleat might be there, with the vaguely-formed intention of making a scene. He looked excited and unsteady. His face was pale and his eyes wild, while his mood seemed to alternate between fits of forced hilarity and sullen depression.

At his entrance an uneasy consciousness fell upon the group. No one dared to question him upon his abrupt return from Gundaroo. The names of the Premier and Mrs. Vallancy, upon the lips of everyone present, were forcibly arrested there. There was an awkward silence, but the General's fine tact bridged over the gulf. Commonplace topics were introduced, and as the dinner proceeded restraint wore off. Conversation flowed smoothly after a time, and jarring notes were drowned in the sound of mirth and repartee.

The champagne-glasses were frequently plied. Colonel Augmering's face reddened, and his mood became expansive. He forgot that he was the Governor of an important colony, and suffered his heart to rejoice in the recollection of past jovial experiences. General Compton's anecdotes began to touch upon women, in a manner more and more significant. When the attendants had left the room, the laughter had reached as high a pitch of uproariousness as is possible in refined male society.

There is a gentlemanly coarseness to be observed in post-prandial conversation, which in the ears of an abstemious listener is apt to sound obnoxiously. Dyson sat silent; his soul rising in a disgust which, under any other circumstances, he might not have felt, his tongue refusing to take part in the piquant discourse that flowed down each side of the table.

The tide of discussion turned towards the relative merits of English and Australian beauties. As was natural, Honoria Longleat's name was mentioned in terms of praise. General Compton was loud in his admiration. Such a figure, such eyes, such hair, must needs place their possessor upon a par with any European belle. Free comments were bestowed upon her smile, her dress, her gait.

Was not her physique of the same type as that of the celebrated Mrs. ——, whom Colonel Augmering must recollect? and so on. It was impossible to take open exception to the remarks, yet Dyson's anger rose to the pitch of fury. That his goddess should be profaned by such vulgar criticism! He made one or two attempts to turn the conversation, but to no avail. Presently Colonel Augmering exclaimed, as though apropos of the subject.

'What a thousand pities that Barrington could not be here this evening! Never was so sorry for a man in my life. Curious that he should have been knocked under, just after hearing of his good luck in having stepped into his brother's shoes. Seems unkind to say so, don't it? I used to know poor old Lionel Barrington, and liked him, though he was not one of your jovial sort; always a bit of a screw. Many is the capital day's sport

I have had in his coverts. By Jove! what a fine woman his mother was! Do you remember her, Compton?'

'A splendid woman,' replied General Compton. 'I know her well. It was I who advised her to send Hardress out here—poor devil! But there was nothing else to be done after that affair in the Guards.'

'You know the truth of that story?' asked Maddox, suddenly.

'Of course. It was talked about in every club in London; but people will have forgotten it long before Hardress's return to England. At any rate, it is not fair to repeat it now. Men will be men, and women, women.'

'And *women, women,*' repeated Vallancy, with diabolical emphasis. 'You are right, General. It is they who drive men to the deuce.'

'The more fools men for being driven,' laughed the General.

'Let us drink confusion to the sex,' continued Vallancy. 'This is uncommonly fine claret. I don't know that I ever tasted better at Brockley—eh, General? Perdition to women!'

'You would not persuade my friend Barrington to join you in that toast,' laughed General Compton. 'He was always a noted admirer of the fair sex; is still, I believe. I hope to congratulate him before long upon his conquest of the Australian beauty, and of her fortune.'

'The Premier will have nothing to say to him,' remarked one of the guests. I know it for a fact. Our *ci-devant* bullock-driver has some queer republican notions, and among them is a hatred of the English aristocracy. But Miss Longleat is a young lady of spirit, and determined to marry whom she pleases. It is a case of genuine love. She and her father have not spoken since the affair came out.'

'The Enchantress of Kooralbyn in love!

cried another. 'I thought that she was *la belle dame sans merci.*'

'Sir,' said Dyson slowly, addressing the Governor, his fury at white heat, 'you will allow me to protest against this public mention of a lady's name.'

'Oh, my dear fellow!' said the Governor in a bantering tone, 'we are all friends here, and all devoted and respectful admirers of the young lady—no one more so than myself. She is national property, and her matrimonial projects are as interesting to the colony as the formation of the Kooya Railway or her father's possible knighthood. But since you are so punctilious, we will drop the subject and confine ourselves to talking about Mr. Barrington. I never was so shocked in my life as when I was told this morning of his accident. By the way, I am not at all clear about the affair. No one seems to know exactly how it happened. Has anyone heard how he was this evening?'

‘I sent to inquire late this afternoon, your Excellency,’ replied the aide-de-camp. ‘They thought that Barrington was better—he was no longer insensible.’

‘How did it take place?’ asked a gentleman who had only arrived from the Bush that afternoon.

‘Barrington was driving down Silver Street in a hansom, about two o’clock this morning. The cabman was tipsy, and ran into something. There was a clean smash, and poor Barrington was knocked against the kerbstone.’

‘I was talking to old Chittenden in the smoking-room, this afternoon,’ said a gentleman seated next Dyson. ‘No one has a keener relish for a bit of gossip, as you and I know. He was full of a mysterious lady in black. He said that she was in the cab with Barrington when the accident happened, and was hustled off by some kind friend before anyone could catch a glimpse of her face.'

'I am afraid,' said the General, 'that my friend Hardress has not been as prudent as one might have hoped. It was surely unwise to trust himself, in the company of Incognita, to the tender mercies of a tipsy cabman. These escapades won't help him in making a good marriage. Not that that is of much consequence now. I am not certain that, under present circumstances, Lady Alice Barrington would welcome an Australian daughter-in-law.'

'And did no one see the lady?' asked the Governor, curiously.

'Clark, of the Lands, watched Barrington, and a tall woman in black, with fair hair, get out of a close carriage at River Terrace, where Barrington lodges, about midnight,' said the aide-de-camp, who knew his patron's weakness, and had come primed with the latest gossip.

'No doubt this was the same lady with whom he was driving later. Clark swears to the hair and the height, but she was holding her hand to her face, so that he could not see her features.'

'By Jove!' exclaimed Colonel Augmering, 'I shall have a nice chaff against Barrington when he gets round. A mysterious female—tall, with golden hair. Can no one tell me the colour of her eyes?'

'They are brown, your Excellency,' said Vallancy, suddenly joining in the discussion, with the air of one well informed upon the subject.

'What! you are acquainted with the fair Anonyma, Mr. Vallancy?' said Colonel Augmering.

Cathcart and Dyson exchanged quick glances across the table.

'In common justice,' exclaimed the latter with a ghastly attempt at unconcern, 'I think the subject ought to be dropped, at least till Mr. Barrington is able to speak for himself. If there *was* a lady in the case, there are obvious reasons why her name should not be mentioned.'

'My dear Maddox,' said the Governor jokingly, 'you are most heroic in your championship, this evening; but don't you think that in this instance it is somewhat misplaced? An unveiled lady, who is seen driving with a gentleman at two o'clock in the morning, is surely public property.'

Dyson's blood ran cold, but clearly there was no more to be said. To pursue his remonstrance would but make matters worse. The men had all drunk too much to be over nice in their distinctions, and a point of honour is not easily discerned through the fumes of wine and cigar smoke.

The remark was followed by a coarse innuendo, greeted with a burst of ribald laughter.

Vallancy was assailed with eager, halfjoking questions, which he parried, stimulating curiosity till the importunities redoubled. For a moment the gentlemanly instinct made him hesitate ; then a cur-like longing for revenge against Longleat got the better of him. It was in his power to damn the reputation of his enemy's daughter, as that enemy had damned that of his wife.

'You all know the lady,' he exclaimed, in loud, clear tones. 'I see no reason why she should disgrace herself, and get off scot-free——'

'For God's sake, think what you are saying, man!' whispered Cathcart convulsively in his ear.

'It was Honoria Longleat, the Premier's daughter,' said Vallancy, looking defiantly around, 'who was seen with Barrington at his lodgings last night, and who was driving with him when the accident happened in Silver Street.'

A sudden, alarming silence fell upon the party. Vallancy was half-terrified by the effect his words had produced, half-cowed by the indignant eyes that were turned upon him.

'I can prove the facts,' he asserted doggedly. 'I have witnesses who can swear to the truth of what I have said. There is not a man in Leichardt's Town able to give me the lie.'

'You are either mad or drunk!' said Dyson, rising like an indignant bear, with a little shake of his broad shoulders. His voice rang clear through the room. He was perfectly calm, and, as he stood erect under the light, looked rigid as iron; but there was a gleam in his eye which pierced into Vallancy's soul, and extinguished the small spark of courage by which it had been animated. 'If you are neither, then you are a cowardly liar! You have foully aspersed a lady whom you believed would be undefended, because her father is not present to protect her from insult. The introduction of her name into such an assemblage as this, was at best a breach of good taste. Had the Premier been here, it could not have been committed. I am glad that the calumny has been uttered in my hearing. I may at least guard from profanation a name which is dearer to me than my own honour.'

Colonel Augmering drew himself up in his chair, and said, with an air of stern dignity that contrasted strangely with his former joviality :

'Mr. Maddox, your severe words reflect somewhat on me as the person presiding at this table. I will not admit that the rebuke has been deserved. Most of us had reason to believe that we were in the company of *gentlemen.* I am shocked and grieved at the turn which a mere bantering conversation has taken. Mr. Vallancy must be labouring under an extraordinary delusion, and, after a moment's reflection, will acknowledge his mistake. As far as we are concerned, this ridiculous accusation shall be as absolutely void as though it had never been uttered.'

'I will not retract what I know to be true,' said Vallancy, doggedly. 'If Mr. Barrington were to swear on his oath that Miss Longleat did not go to his rooms with him at midnight last night, I could prove him guilty of perjury.'

'I repeat that Mr. Vallancy has lied,' said Maddox, deliberately. 'I am ready to argue the point with him when and where he pleases. Gentlemen, I appeal to your chivalry to help me in vindicating a pure and innocent lady from slander. That lady is engaged to be my wife. Surely this is sufficient answer to Mr. Vallancy's accusation.'

Several of the gentlemen cried, 'Shame not to have told us sooner;' some laughed;

some looked disconcerted, and others shouted 'Brava!'

'I congratulate you, Mr. Maddox,' said the Governor. 'It would have spared some unpleasantness if you had made this announcement earlier in the evening. It is, as you say, disproof sufficient of Mr. Vallancy's statement. But why this secrecy?'

'The engagement has been lately arranged,' replied Maddox, imperturbably. 'There were private reasons for not making it public; now, for Miss Longleat's sake, the more widely it is known the better. And it must be understood that any disparaging allusion to my future wife is the deepest insult to me. I thank your Excellency for your good wishes.'

'My dear sir,' said the Governor, testily, 'there is no one here who would for a moment credit Mr. Vallancy's statement. The whole thing is a ridiculous misconception, and must not be allowed to go beyond these walls. Mr. Vallancy, you must see the absurdity of what you have said. Your eyes have deceived you; you should be careful in accepting their evidence too readily. I am thankful, at least, that your accusation was made in this company. As a personal favour, I beg that you will withdraw it without further question. Gentlemen, I put it to you as men of honour: this scandalous report must not pass our lips. I am sorry, General, that the hilarity of the evening should have been marred by this unfortunate mistake.'

'No,' said General Compton, courteously; 'one must regret the position of my poor friend Barrington. Mr. Maddox, I congratulate you heartily, though I cannot but deplore the fact that so fair a star must in future shine only upon Australian shores.'

'Mr. Vallancy has not yet withdrawn his statement,' said Cathcart, coolly.

Vallancy looked down the table. Every

gaze was fixed upon him disapprovingly, while Dyson Maddox, as he stood erect, with flashing eyes and sinewy frame, looked no mean antagonist. The natural cowardice of the man triumphed.

'Mr. Maddox's announcement has startled me,' he said in a tone of sullen dissatisfaction. I do not withdraw my statement, but I admit the possibility of having been deceived; I may have mistaken another lady for Miss Longleat. I will respect his Excellency's wishes, and will not again mention the subject. I wish Mr. Maddox joy,' he added malignantly, 'in his intended marriage with the Premier's daughter.'

'Fill your glasses, gentlemen. Long life and happiness to Mr. Dyson Maddox and his bride-elect!'

The toast was drunk with some enthusiasm. Maddox made a brief reply, and shortly afterwards the company dispersed.

CHAPTER X.

BEFORE THE OPENING OF PARLIAMENT.

CATHCART and Dyson walked together to the lodgings of the latter. Hardly a word was spoken till they entered the sitting-room. Here a fire was burning, and a tray, upon which were glasses and a decanter of spirits, was laid upon the table.

Cathcart poured himself out some brandy, with the remark:

'One needs a pick-me-up after an experience of this sort. What unselfish fools we men are!' he added cynically. 'Why do we expend so much valuable emotion upon a woman who allows herself to become infatuated with a scoundrel, and only exacts interest from outsiders as a tribute to her beauty? What does Honoria Longleat care for me? and yet I have been weak enough to make myself utterly wretched upon her account. Shall I mix for you, old fellow?'

Dyson shook his head and sank wearily into a chair, lifting his hand with an action that was habitual to him, to brush away the heavy locks that drooped over his forehead. Presently he looked up, and said in a questioning tone:

'I could have done nothing else? There was no other way of saving her,' he resumed, seeing that Cathcart did not reply. 'If her father had been there she would have been less defenceless; but I am glad that he was absent.'

'This chivalrous sentiment is all moon-shine!' said Cathcart, brusquely. 'Do you expect me to believe in your pure disinterestedness?'

'Believe what you choose. It can make no difference to me or to her. Yes, you do believe, for you know me. . . . At one moment I feel a mean cur, at another a fine fellow. I suppose in the abstract it is virtuous to tell lies for a woman's sake. As far as I am concerned nothing can come of it but personal humiliation. Do you not see? I must tell her what I have done; she may charge me with the worst motives. She *must* show herself at the Opening to-morrow. She will be congratulated upon all sides. Heavens! what a sickening farce! How will she play her part? Oh, my poor Honoria!'

'Miss Longleat is very dramatic,' said Cathcart. 'She will enjoy a scene. I don't think you need pity her so much. As for you, I am not disposed to be very sorry for you either. She will not suspect you of sinister designs. There is a spark of nobility in her nature—it will rise to a flame now.'

'If you had seen her last night,' said Dyson, 'you would have felt as I feel, that there is a gulf between us which must always hold us apart. My love for her—my pity—is deeper than I can express. Her instinct may divine what is in my heart, but she is too proud to endure compassion, and she will turn from me as though I were her enemy.'

'Perhaps so,' said Cathcart. 'I would not venture to predict the disposition of any woman. If I had any influence with her, I should advise her to go away with Mrs. Ferris for a time. Let her return when the Longleat and Vallancy scandal has died out. This would be best for you too. And now good-night. I shall stick to my determination of going home to-morrow. I suppose you have nothing to say to me about station business?'

'Nothing,' replied Dyson. 'Good-night. Thank you.'

Cathcart had made a mental resolution to acquaint Miss Longleat with the facts of the case; and before ten o'clock the following morning he was at The Bunyas, and had sent up a message begging Honoria to grant him a few moments' interview. He was shown into the drawing-room, and asked to wait.

Presently Honoria entered, tall and stately, in her trailing black gown, her face white and set, her hands nervously clasped before her. She moved very slowly; her lips twitched, and her eyes gazed straight before her with a kind of mournful defiance. She looked as though she had nerved herself to encounter an ordeal.

Cathcart began with awkward abruptness:

'I have called early because I wished particularly to see you before Maddox could be here. I know that he means to come; he has something to tell you. You—you are going to the Opening, I suppose?'

Her lips tightened, and a blush overspread her face. Her look seemed to say, 'You are cruel;' but she answered steadily:

'No, I am not going.'

'You ought to go—you must go,' said Cathcart, insistently. 'After what has happened—for your own sake.'

'I do not wish to discuss the matter,' replied Honoria, haughtily.

'You are angry with me for daring to speak to you. Of course you know that I saw you the night before last. I have tried to shield you from the results of your—your imprudence. . . . But I am a fool to trouble myself about other people's business. I had better have held my tongue and allowed Maddox to tell his own tale: it is my weakness to be officious and Quixotic.'

‘I am grateful to you,’ said Honoria, gently. ‘You mean kindly to me, but do you not understand how painful this is to me?’

‘You and Maddox are in a disagreeable position—it is fair to him that you should hear the facts of the case from an independent witness. There might be danger of misconception, and he is too noble to be allowed to run the risk of that. Last night, at the dinner to General Compton, your relations with Barrington were freely discussed. You were identified as the lady who accompanied him to his lodgings. Your fair fame was at the mercy of these men's tongues. Maddox rose and gave your accuser the lie. There was only one way in which he could effectually protect you from slander. He said that you were his promised wife—that your honour was his to defend. Do you not see? you may save yourself through him. That is what he wishes—only to bear the brunt for you—till all is past and forgotten. Then you may fling him off, if you please, like a glove that is worn out. You will do well to lean upon him. . . . And you must go to the Opening—you have your part to play. You are a brave woman, and you must not fail. . . . Honoria! You are ill—you are faint! Can I call anyone?—what can I do?'

Honoria had laid her head upon the back of a high chair, and was shaking with convulsive sobs.

'No—go!' she murmured. 'I have had a bad night. I do not feel very well. There was no danger of my misconstruing him. I have learned what he is at last. That is true nobility—to bear the burden for one who is despised—humiliated. It was kind of you to come and tell me, but go now, please, and leave me alone.'

She held out her hand to Cathcart without lifting her head. He pressed it silently, and departed.

For a long while she stood where he had left her, her tears falling like rain, and her bosom heaving with an emotion that was half exultation.

Could she regret her humiliation if it opened before her a vista of purer love—if it taught her to comprehend herself and him.

By-and-by the door opened, and Dyson entered. He started when Honoria turned and faced him; he had not expected that she would be in waiting for him, and had prepared himself for some minutes of miserable suspense. His brow was moody, and his lips locked: his eyes looked almost fierce, so deep were the lines between them. He was carelessly dressed, and had the appearance rather of the explorer than of the suitor.

He saw that she was painfully agitated,

and attributed her embarrassment to the remembrance of their last meeting. She was standing when he entered, and gave him her hand without bidding him be seated.

Thus they faced each other.

'Honoria!' he began abruptly, 'I have come to beg that you will be present at the Opening to-day. There is a painful ordeal before you. I would spare you if I could; but for your own sake it is necessary. Will you go?'

'The least way in which I can prove my gratitude is to trust you, and obey you,' she said very low. 'I will do as you bid me. And who can I trust but you?

'You *will* trust me?' said Dyson. 'Thank you. I have greater need for your confidence than you know of. I have something to tell you which will pain you deeply. You may think that I have taken an unwarrantable liberty—indeed, I do not know how to explain

I can but beg you to believe that I acted in the only way possible—for your safety. . . . You must know,' he went on, after a moment's pause, seeing that she waited with downcast eyes, 'that such a thing as happened to you the other night is—was—might blast for ever a woman's reputation. I must speak bluntly in order that you may understand. The world is evil-minded, and has no respect for innocency. Last night, at the dinner to General Compton, it was said that you had been seen in company with Barrington. You had been recognised, and a mean cur who was present thought himself at liberty to vilify you. There was only one way in which I could shield you—in which I could silence malicious tongues. I said that you were to be my wife. It is but playing a part for a little while, and then you are free as air. The position will be sorely distasteful to you. Forgive me for placing you in it. It is only less humiliating than that from which you have escaped.'

Honoria looked suddenly up into his face.

'You make nothing of the sacrifice. *This* is humiliation, but it has no pain. I know—I had been told before you came of what you have done for me. . . . Do not think that I could misconstrue your generosity. I am deeply grateful. As you say, we have each a part to act. It is more difficult for you than for me.'

'My mind has changed,' said Dyson, placing a different interpretation upon her words to that which she intended to convey. 'A short time ago I could not have borne this, but I have schooled myself during these months. Look upon me as a puppet, from whom nothing is expected, to whom nothing need be given. It is only for two or three months—nay weeks—for you must go away, and then all this will be past. Can you endure for a few days to be congratulated, to be asked questions, to appear with me occasionally in public? I will spare you in all ways that I can. . . . And you must understand that you commit yourself to nothing, that whatever I might have wished once is over now—that you need have no fears, no scruples.'

'I understand,' she said very coldly, and almost involuntarily drew herself away from him.

Each was fearful of wounding the delicate susceptibilities of the other; and though the hearts of both were full of yearning, they were held apart by the chill current of misconception that swept between them.

There was silence for several moments. Dyson looked wistfully at Honoria. She, with still face but heaving bosom, held her gaze averted.

'You will go, then?' he said at length.

'Yes,' she replied. 'I will go. It is time that I got ready.'

The clock on the mantelshelf struck eleven as she spoke. It was imperative also that Dyson should prepare for the ceremonial. Honoria turned to leave the room, but as she passed him, arrested her steps, and murmured falteringly:

'He—he is better?'

'He has recovered consciousness,' replied Dyson, coldly. 'His symptoms this morning are more favourable. There is no danger. I thought you would wish to know.'

She still paused irresolutely; then suddenly caught his hand, and lifted to his face her eyes, swimming with unshed tears.

'You are very good,' she almost whispered. 'Oh! I am grateful. Don't think hardly of me; I am very miserable,' then swiftly left him.

. .

A dose of sal volatile, a toilette, and the necessity for composure, are, in the case of ladies, effectual antidotes to emotion. Honoria stamped down her tremors with an iron foot, and prepared to show a dauntless front to the critical eyes of her little world. She dressed herself in a black gown artistically draped with lace, and placed a bunch of snowy camellias at her throat. A little black lace bonnet surmounted her fair hair. Her eyes were bright, and had that smarting look which proceeds from over-excitement, and her face was very pale; but except for a slight quivering of her lips, she was perfectly calm.

In the drawing-room she found her father, who was also ready to go to the House. He too had the appearance of having undergone some agitating experience, and of having braced himself to meet Fate. His face was white, but there was a deep red flush upon his brow, and his hands twitched nervously. He advanced to meet his daughter, gazing at her admiringly and triumphantly.

'Honie,' he said, 'Dyson has told me that you have consented to be engaged to him, and that it is all off with that cursed Englishman. Oh, my dear, my dear! you are safe now; whatever happens, *you* are in good keeping. Things are going straight at last. The wish closest my heart will be fulfilled. Tell me, is it really true?'

'It is true that I have consented to be—engaged to Dyson Maddox, and I will never, of my free will, see Mr. Barrington again,' replied Honoria, mechanically.

Her only safeguard against entire collapse lay in self-repression, and in the avoidance of explanations.

Longleat wistfully regarded his daughter.

'Kiss me, Honie, before we start. Kiss me that I may know all is straight between us. No matter whether our ways lie apart or not. So long as all is well with you, I'm happy.'

She laid her hands upon his arm and drew close to him, looking up into his face with a dumb appeal.

'Honie!' he cried, 'my dear, is anything the matter?'

She rested her head for a moment against his shoulder and clung to him, and he kissed her, fondling with his great rough hands her neck and hair.

'Father!' she said only, but her voice was full of yearning.

'We haven't understood each other,' he murmured brokenly, and the tears were in his eyes. 'Men and women are different. There's things men can't overcome—and—and—you're above me. I'm not fit; it's best we should be apart. He'll take my place—and it'll be well with you—that's all—all I care for.'

She understood him. It was a crisis—a farewell.

They clung to each other a moment longer, then went hand in hand to the carriage, and drove together to the Houses of Parliament, where the Premier's daughter, preceded by the Usher of the Black Rod, took her place under the full gaze of many eyes.

CHAPTER XI.

THE ORDEAL.

THOUGH Honoria's guilty self-consciousness had exaggerated the fearfulness of the ordeal, it was still so terrible to her that only the most determined exercise of self-command enabled her to maintain an air of composure, and to support without flinching the many curious glances which were levelled at her.

The report of her engagement had spread as widely as Dyson had intended, and to many of those present at the ceremonial the demeanour of the Premier's daughter afforded greater food for interest than the exposition of the Ministerial policy, which Colonel Augmering delivered in his mildly pompous manner.

General Compton, who in full uniform was standing at the left of the Governor, directed his eyes towards Miss Longleat in a glance of half-admiring, half-impertinent curiosity, which Dyson noting, resented with indignation, and of which she herself, though she dared not meet it, was painfully conscious. Uncertain as to who had been present at the dinner-party, Honoria believed that each gentleman who looked at her, was mentally charging her with the shame of that midnight esclandre, and saw in the meaning smiles and nods which, upon her entrance, were liberally bestowed upon her, only veiled insolence or contemptuous wonder.

With her humiliating foreknowledge, it

seemed to her impossible that the secret of her true relations with Dyson should not be at once divined. Did not his grave look and the deep lines of anxiety between his brows belie all suggestions of triumphant love? And what affinity could her own pale, rigid face and mournful, defiant eyes have with the blushing demureness of the conventional bride-expectant?

Had she been less unhappy the mockery of the situation would have appealed to her sense of the ludicrous; but the old Honoria, who had stood aloof in impatient superiority from the pettiness and vulgarity of the circle in which she lived, and who in the keenest excitement of her thirst after experience, had never been able to divest herself of the cynical sense of individuality, had vanished in a night, and there had taken her place a shame-stricken creature, no longer pre-eminent and innocently confident, but unnerved after confronting peril of the kind which to a pure woman is more terrible than death, sick with revulsion, and only sensible of deep personal humiliation, and of an intense need for protection and support.

The actual performance lasted but a few minutes. There had been the usual clatter of guns and braying of instruments, with all the farcical pomposity of the viceregal entrance; then the formal delivery of the speech, and the buzz succeeding its conclusion.

These moments were the crucial test of Honoria's self-possession. As Lady Georgina Augmering passed out of the chamber she paused, and with a curious expression of sympathetic inquiry and admiring protest upon her handsome face whispered hurriedly:

'You must come and see me to-morrow and explain matters. I really do not know whether to congratulate you or to condole with you. In fact, I am quite mystified about the whole affair. . . . And then Colonel Augmering has told me—— My dear, I always said that you were in a *most* unfortunate position, and I am sure that in every way my wish has been to countenance you. And Mr. Barrington's mother having been a friend of mine—I have had a particular interest in you both. But you will confide in me. To-morrow, then, at eleven.'

Lady Georgina's rapid exit spared Honoria from replying. Then the wife of one of the Ministers, who was sitting next her, bent forward to offer her congratulations and express her pleasurable surprise ; and Miss Nell Little, looking charming in a coquettish bonnet covered with pink rosebuds, exclaimed loud enough to be heard by the President, who smiled and nodded :

'What a duck you are, Honoria, to give us the fun of a Parliamentary wedding. It must be an evening affair now that it is not necessary out in Australia to be married in those stupid canonical hours. I think that the least compliment the members could pay the Premier's daughter would be to club together and give a ball in this building to celebrate the event. I shall suggest it immediately. We have got such a majority that I am certain there would not be the smallest difficulty in passing a vote. It would bang the greatest lark out; and oh, I am dying to waltz with the new Speaker. My dear, is it true that you have driven Mr. Barrington to desperation, and that he tried to commit suicide in a hansom-cab? I am told that he has turned into a baronet. Well, if he is not quite dead there is a chance for some of us yet.'

The whole House, basement and galleries, was in a flutter. The hum of laughter and conversation filled the air. Brightly-clad figures filed in and out among the benches and trooped into the corridors; while the wives and daughters of the new members examined the decorations of the Chamber, and stooped curiously over the books and documents upon the table.

Honoria stood near the daïs surrounded by smiling groups, who were offering congratulations and asking eager questions. When had the engagement been arranged? how soon would the marriage take place? etc. Some banteringly commented upon Miss Longleat's silence and preoccupation, while others, bolder or more intimate, rallied her upon her recent flirtation with Barrington. Dyson, watching her from the distance of a few paces, saw her wince beneath the elephantine jokes of some privileged members of the House, and longing to save her from further torture, pressed through the ring which surrounded her, parried several awkward thrusts, and calmly appropriated his *fiancée*, inventing upon the spur of the moment a message from the Premier to the effect that the carriage was waiting.

She clutched his arm convulsively, but did not speak.

'You have behaved bravely,' he whispered, as he placed her in the carriage. 'There is peace before you for the rest of the day. Even if you wished it, I should not advise you to come and listen to the debates this afternoon. I hear rumours of a violent personal attack upon the Premier, and am afraid that the Gundaroo appointment may be mooted again, and that unpleasant insinuations may be made.'

Honoria nodded apathetically.

'But you are certain of support,' she said.

'I don't know what to think. There is an ominous air of mystery about the other side. However, they are pretty certain to bring all their artillery to bear upon us at once, and we shall soon see what sort of fighting they mean. By the way, your father bade me tell you not to wait for him. You will probably not see him till after the House has risen this evening.'

He gave the order to the coachman, and Honoria drove home alone. Gradually the buzz died out in the streets, and at two o'clock all was still. By three the excitement would be renewed, and the struggle would have commenced; but now the world political and non-political must eat, and while its appetite was being satisfied there would be quiet in the camps.

To Honoria, whose inward vision was so intensely quickened, these outside interests seemed but as specks upon the horizon of her emotions. She ate mechanically, attended to Janie's wants, and listened to the child's prattle, all the time with the sense that there were two distinct personalities imprisoned within her frame; the one palpitating and quivering in response to Barrington's influence, the nervous symptoms of which had never been so acutely felt as now; the other terrified and stricken, clinging to the thought of Maddox as to an anchor which might secure her against the rushing tide of her own passionate impulses. She was afraid of being alone, and had a dread lest she might yield to the desire to communicate with Barrington which was creeping over her. Her only safety seemed to lie in action. She took off the dress she had worn at the Opening, and clad herself in a quiet-coloured gown, wrapping a thick veil round her head; then, taking little Janie by the hand, she set out for a long ramble beside the bank of the river.

Meanwhile the Premier, with an excitement raging in his breast no less keen than that which devoured his daughter, quitted the

Parliamentary Buildings immediately the ceremonial of the Opening was over, and after rapidly traversing a side street which led towards the river, crossed in the ferry-boat to the south side, and bent his steps in the direction of Adams's Hotel.

With a view to escaping observation, Mrs. Vallancy had wisely chosen her temporary retreat. It was a two-storied wooden building surrounded by trees and situated close to the bridge low down upon the banks of the Leichardt. From its position and ready accessibility to the river, it was considerably frequented by commercial travellers and the captains of small vessels which crowded by the wharves or were anchored midway in the stream, and was little known among the upper circles of Leichardt's Town society.

The place appeared quiet and respectable enough. There was a side entrance, which gave easy approach to a private suite of rooms upon the upper story, which Mr. Longleat imagined to be occupied by Mrs. Vallancy. Anxious to avoid any curious glances of recognition which might be bestowed upon him by the revellers at the bar, he cautiously sheltered himself beneath a row of pines which screened one side of the hotel, and presented himself at the modest private door.

His knock was answered by a comely but untidily-dressed woman, who led a child by the hand. She was, as the Premier supposed, the landlady of the inn. She also at a glance assured herself of the identity of the visitor.

Mr. Longleat suddenly reflecting that it might be indiscreet to inquire for Mrs. Vallancy under that name, and not knowing whether she had adopted another, stammered, hesitated, and finally asked if there were not a lady staying at the hotel.

'Mrs. Vallancy has been here for three or four days, if you are meaning her,' replied the landlady, boldly. 'She left two hours ago in the *Hydaspes* for Sydney.'

'Left—for Sydney,' repeated Mr. Longleat in dismay, a sudden giddiness seizing him and causing him to stagger up against the door-post. 'You must be mistaken. It cannot be true. Surely—surely you are thinking of some other lady; not of Mrs. Vallancy.'

'I mean Mrs. Vallancy who was living at Emu Point. There is only one of that name in Leichardt's Town that I know of. I was her father's housemaid long ago, before I married Adams and came to this house. I ought to know her well. She had her reasons for keeping quiet for a few days. I was sorry for her, poor thing, though I don't want to make out that she was an angel; it is not the men's fault if women are that. I was fond of her for the sake of old times, and I went down with her to the steamer this morning and helped her to get off.'

'I—I am a friend of Mrs. Vallancy's,' faltered the Premier. 'My name is Longleat. I see that you know me. You may have heard her speak of me. Did she leave no message—no letter? I had an appointment with her here to-day.'

'There is a letter for you, sir, but it is not here,' replied the woman, civilly. 'Mrs. Vallancy bade me tell you, in case you should call, that she had written to you to explain why she had left Leichardt's Land.'

'And there was nothing more?'

'Nothing more, sir,' repeated Mrs. Adams.

Mr. Longleat stooped to pat the little boy's head, as much with the object of concealing his agitation as from his invariable impulse of tenderness towards children. He placed five shillings in the chubby hand, and would have gone to devour his disappointment as best he might; but as he lifted his head and met the landlady's eyes, a look which he saw in them, at once curious, contemptuous, and compassionate, arrested him.

'Do *you* know why she went away?' he asked pointedly. 'Had her husband found her out? Had she received letters? What induced her to make up her mind so suddenly? My good woman, tell me all that you can. There, there is something for the child;' and Mrs. Adams's fingers closed over two bright pieces of gold.

Clearly, here was a source of benefit not to be lightly disdained. And there was no obligation upon her to be silent upon Mrs. Vallancy's business. On the contrary, her woman's heart yearned for a gossip. Mrs. Adams looked at the Premier, hesitated, smiled, and retreated further into the passage.

'You *can* tell me something,' exclaimed Longleat, whose anxiety was intensified by an undefined fear. 'You are in Mrs. Vallancy's confidence. Come, speak out your mind. Tell me all that you know. I will make it worth your while.'

There was a door upon the right-hand side of the passage. Mrs. Adams opened it, and led the way into a small parlour.

'You had best come in here, sir,' she said; 'I don't want my husband to know anything about the matter. I wasn't, as you may say, in Mrs. Vallancy's confidence, but I think that I know why she has gone to Sydney—more's the pity!'

'Go on,' said Mr. Longleat impatiently, standing with his hands clasped upon the table, and his face flushed and eager.

'I knew Mrs. Vallancy when she was a girl, sir. As I said, I was three years housemaid at her father's, before I left to marry

Adams. I was there at the time of Miss Constance's engagement to Mr. Fielding. Did you know of that, sir?'

Yes, Mr. Longleat had known of it. There had been much gossip upon the subject during the period of Fielding's late sojourn in Leichardt's Town. The Premier remembered his jealousy of Fielding in the days of his budding passion for Constance, and her calm admission of the old engagement when he had taxed her with too strong an interest in the handsome squatter. He nodded, and Mrs. Adams went on:

'Miss Constance was vain and flighty, but I am certain that Mr. Fielding was the only man she ever really loved. There's more behind than I know. She has quarrelled with her husband—that much she told me; and now she has gone to her ruin. Last night a telegram came to her from Mr. Fielding——'

'What was the wording of that telegram?' cried Longleat, hoarsely. 'You saw it. Tell me. I'll give you five pounds to tell me.'

'I saw it,' assented Mrs. Adams. 'There was nothing to prevent me from reading it. It was lying open on the dressing-table. Miss Constance was always careless about her letters and things. As well as I remember, it went like this: "I leave here to-morrow; will meet you in Sydney. Telegraph at once by what steamer you will arrive. I will make all arrangements." It was dated from Melbourne. I took her answer and sent it myself. It was to say that she was going by the *Hydaspes* to-day, and that he was to meet her at an hotel. I forget the name. I knew what that meant well enough; and, before I took the message, I begged and prayed her to think what she was doing. I told her it would be better for her to go back and live with her husband, even if he were to beat her and starve her, than to throw away her chance of keeping an honest woman. But it was no use. She was determined. All she would say was: "It's too late now, Bessie." So at last I gave up trying to persuade her, and helped her to settle things as best I could. I went with her to the steamer, and took her passage under a false name, so that folks shouldn't know where she had gone. She had a lot of money with her. I can't tell you how much, or where she got it; but all I know is, that Fielding couldn't have sent it; and jewellery—rings, and lockets, and bracelets—I never saw the like. There was a cheque for a hundred pounds, she said you had lent her; that I got cashed at the bank. No fear of her coming to want. Underneath her dress she was wearing a necklace of diamonds that looked good enough for a queen. I caught a sight of it when she opened her bodice, where she had sewed up her money, to get me a note for paying her passage. I told her she'd be getting herself murdered on board by some of those rascally Chinese, if she let them see what was round her neck ; but she only laughed, and said the diamonds were paste, and they made a great show for next to nothing. There might be truth in that. I don't want to think too hardly of Miss Constance, but there were things said about her and other people that I'd be loth to believe. I am glad that she has gone, and that my hands are clear of the business. I haven't dared tell my husband what has come to her—he that prided himself upon keeping his house respectable—and the only comfort I've got is, that she was so bent upon her own way, it was no good trying to hold her back. My belief is that she was right, and that it *was* too late. There! be quiet, Tommy. Don't you see that mother is talking? Drat the boy! What's he after now?'

It was, perhaps, fortunate that Mrs. Adams's garrulous propensities spared Longleat the necessity for making any commentary upon her tale, and that her attention was at its close diverted from observation of her hearer to the vagaries of Tommy, who, having possessed himself of a knife that had been lying upon the table, darted from the room and led his mother a scamper down the passage and into the bar, where a brief colloquy with her husband delayed Mrs. Adams still further, and enabled Longleat to overcome, unwitnessed, the first outbreak of his wrath and agitation. He staggered like a drunken man, striking vainly with his clenched fist in the air, as he muttered between his teeth:

'By ——, I have been fooled!'

His heart palpitated wildly, and the room seemed to reel before him. The blood forsook his head. For a moment he knew not what had happened, and half-fancied, when he came to himself, that the fit which for months he had inwardly dreaded had seized him at last. But with the sound of the woman's returning footsteps the animal courage of the man reasserted itself. He shook his burly frame, and though the moisture stood in great drops upon his brow, and his knees shook so that he was obliged to steady himself by grasping the table for support, he lifted his head and met her inquisitive glance bravely, saying, with a pitiful effort to resume his usual manner:

'I am very sorry for what you have told me, if it is true; but, being a friend of Mrs. Vallancy's, I can hardly believe that it is so. Mrs. Vallancy, doubtless, had private reasons for wishing to leave Leichardt's Town. I can guess what they were; and it is natural that she should have asked Mr. Fielding to meet her in Sydney. You might do a great deal of harm by gossiping about the matter. . . . And that cheque which you cashed. I do not wish it known that I lent Mrs. Vallancy money. She had calls upon her—in—in discharging which I offered to assist her; but it would annoy me greatly were my name to transpire in connection with her. My good woman, you are well-meaning I am sure. I shall be glad if you will accept this little present from me as the—as a recognition of your silence and discretion.'

He fumbled in his pocket-book, and produced a bank-note, which he placed on the table before her.

Mrs. Adams, needing no further confirmation of her suspicions, quietly folded it up and put it in her pocket. She felt certain that the donor of the diamonds, and the supplier of the mysterious cash which had been secreted upon Mrs. Vallancy's person, stood before her. She was not compassionate of the Premier's discomfiture. A man old enough to be a grandfather, she argued, deserved to be fleeced and then flouted by a designing young woman, with whom he had been weak enough to become infatuated. Of the trio, Mrs. Adams's sympathies flowed far more freely towards Brian Fielding, whom memory designated as a 'real gentleman,' and worthy of a better fate than to be saddled with such an encumbrance as Constance Vallancy.

'I understand, sir,' she replied stiffly. 'I am not given to gossiping, and if I were, I have too much self-respect to mix myself up with such a matter. Of course I knew that you took a particular interest in Mrs. Vallancy, or I should not have spoken as I have done. You look upset, sir. Perhaps I can bring you a glass of something. I can easily fetch it, if you wish.'

'No—no,' said Longleat. 'Good-morning.

'You may depend upon me, sir,' said Mrs. Adams, as she attended him to the door.

He passed out, and she closed it after him, the richer for the visit by several sovereigns, not counting Tommy's odd five shillings.

Instead of re-crossing by the ferry-boat, as he had come, the Premier turned to his right and walked on over the bridge. The ground still seemed unsteady beneath his feet, and the noise of the traffic buzzed in his ears. He knocked up against a pedestrian and mechanically apologised: afterwards picking his steps more carefully.

The only feeling of which he was strongly conscious was a necessity for movement. It seemed to him that if he stood still for a moment dizziness would get the better of him, and he must fall to the ground.

He strode on, like a man in a dream, till he reached the Treasury. He entered his office, and looked at the letters which had accumulated upon his table since the morning, but among them there was none from Constance. Touching a gong, he summoned a clerk from an outer office, and desired that all letters which arrived for him that day should be sent by special messenger to the House, and delivered to him there.

He observed that the man eyed him curiously, and when he was alone looked at himself in the glass above the mantelshelf, straightened his collar, smoothed his hair, and endeavoured to shape his features into their normal expression; then a terrible, sickening sense of revolt overcame him. He flung his arms heavily upon the marble shelf, and struck his head against them.

'My God!' he cried, 'I cannot bear it—I cannot bear it!'

He remained so for several moments, clenching his hands, and beating his forehead in passionate rebellion against the fate which had worked the ruin of all his hopes. Yet it was characteristic of the man that he uttered no execration against the woman who had made him her dupe. Constance Vallancy seemed to him less the being who had wronged him than the instrument of a remorseless destiny.

If he had sinned, retribution had followed his crime.

He had a feverish anxiety to know how Constance excused her falsity. Her letter had been probably directed to The Bunyas; it had been foolish of him not to go there at once. He put on his hat and walked forth, choosing the least-frequented side of the road, and shunning the recognition of passers-by who brushed up against him.

In Alfred Street, leading to the Houses of Parliament, excited groups discussed the vice-regal speech, and the probable result of the afternoon session. Strange to say, the political crisis which but a short time ago had been the dominant interest in Longleat's mind, seemed now to have sunk into insignificance, and in spite of the many portentous signs around him, the Premier was absolutely unsuspicious of the grave nature of the Oppositionist attack.

It was now nearly three o'clock, and members were on their way back to the House. To most of them Longleat as he strode past was an object of interest, and several hailed him by his name, but he took no notice, steadily pursuing his way with his eyes upon the ground, until he reached his own dwelling.

He entered by the side-gate and betook himself to the study, where by his orders all letters that arrived during his absence were placed in readiness for his perusal. A miscellaneous collection strewed the table, but still there was none from Mrs. Vallancy. He summoned a servant and delivered the same order that he had given to the clerk of the Treasury.

He asked whether anyone had been at The Bunyas since the morning, and was informed that Dyson Maddox had called twice, and that the Attorney-General had also inquired for him, and had appeared anxious to see him before the House reopened.

The Premier wondered vaguely what fresh political agitation was afloat; but the sensation of giddiness and of vital collapse seemed still to numb his reasoning faculties. It would hardly have cost him a pang had he then been informed of the crushing blow in store for him; indeed, it may be doubted whether at the moment his mental powers were equal to taking a review of his position.

He felt the need of a stimulant to sustain his energies, and opening a private cellaret, poured out a glass of brandy, and drank it at a gulp. Fortified by the draught, he went out again. It was barely ten minutes' walk from The Bunyas to the Parliamentary Buildings, and the clock struck the half-hour as he ascended the great stone steps, and then entered the Assembly Chamber.

CHAPTER XII.

THE IMPEACHMENT OF THE PREMIER.

THE House was filling rapidly when Longleat took his place at the head of the Ministerial bench to the right of the Speaker's chair. There was a pregnant silence in the atmosphere which betokened expectancy of something unusual and interesting. A bystander, ignorant of the personal current which underlay the strife of political parties, would certainly have noted and marvelled at the shadow of troubled gravity which clouded the faces of the members as they filed into their seats.

There was no buzz of conversation—no cheery interchange of jokes. The Ministers looked thoughtful, and whispered together with an uneasy air of assurance. The Leader of the Opposition, after calmly surveying the House in the manner of a general who calculates the chances of victory and defeat, smiled sardonically and buried his head over a pile of notes. It was remarked that whereas the cross-benches were fuller than usual, the two sides of the House were more fairly balanced than could have been anticipated from the result of the recent elections. There was a significant solemnity in the attitudes of all present. The Sergeant-at-Arms sat like a picture of Time with his hour-glass. The new Speaker, nervous under the consciousness of his lately-donned trappings, had yet stiffened with a certain artificial dignity beseeming the gravity of the occasion, so that the brief prayers which inaugurated the proceedings seemed less a solemn farce than the prelude to deliberations of deep and agitating interest.

Certain formal business was transacted. A petition, which censured a particular Government measure during the recess, was read and laid upon the table. The Speaker made his short report; and then one of the new members rose to move the appointment of a committee to prepare, and afterwards, the adoption of the Address in reply to the Speech. The Ministerial programme was commented upon more critically than approvingly. The orator was an old colonist who prided himself upon being a free-lance, and who cherished mildly emphatic views, which for years he had been longing to air in the Assembly, and which from their varied nature imparted a savour of irrelevancy to his remarks.

But all this was child's play. The Premier sat, his head bowed, unhearing, unheeding.

The hours were growing, and surely it was time that he should receive Constance's letter. His mind was crowded with images and conjectures which obscured his outer vision, and it was with difficulty that he brought himself to the point of replying lucidly to a question put to him by one of his colleagues, and roused himself by a vigorous effort to comment upon a point of order which had been raised by a truculent member upon the Opposition side.

The mover's speech was prosy, and there were increasing signs of impatience visible among the occupants of the benches and the galleries. Still the leader of the Opposition sat brooding over his notes, quietly biding his time when, as several there predicted, he would spring forth like a lion from his lair.

The Address was duly seconded by a more strictly Ministerial adherent. Then, just as the dusk was falling, Mr. Middleton slowly rose, and with his hands in his waistcoat-pockets, balanced himself upon the very edge of the step upon which he stood, and with a bland smile and studied air of repression addressed himself to the chair.

No lamb could at the onset have bleated more mildly. He complimented the honourable member for Nerang upon the admirable manner in which the Adoption of the Address in reply had been moved. . . . He was sure that the honourable member, from his long labours as a colonist and varied experience, would be a most valuable addition to the House, etc. . . . He believed that it had been usual upon various occasions before dealing with the proposals of the Government to comment upon the proceedings of the Ministry during the recess. . . . The recently published list of appointments and dismissals in the departments of the Minister for Works and the Postmaster-General called for attention. The frequent use by members of the Government, of special trains and the abuse of telegraphic privileges, were matters to which he thought it necessary to make allusion. The ratification of certain contracts without the authority of the House invited censure; and so on, in a soft strain of animadversion, till the leading features of the Ministerial policy—the Kooya railway and the great Loan Bill—were trenchantly assailed. Then smooth generalisations became pointed personalities. The speaker's voice waxed louder and his gesticulations more impressive. Fire darted from his eyes, and venom gathered upon his tongue. Each word bore a carefully primed and cutting reference to the Premier. It was evident that he had risen to attack, not the policy, but the man.

During the last session, he cried at the close of this preliminary peroration, the Premier had announced that it was his determination to stand or fall upon the question of Southern Railway Extension. Upon that ostensible point of division between Government and Opposition, honourable members now seated in the House were supposed to have taken sides. . . . How many had deeply considered the true interests of the colony, and had seriously represented to their constituents the real bearings of the question, was a matter of private opinion. . . . The Premier had trafficked upon his personal prestige, and by dint of affected magnanimity and overwhelming braggadocio, had contrived to worm himself into the confidence of the country; but it was his—Mr. Middleton's—opinion that only a sharp revulsion—which the disclosure of certain hidden facts, impeaching the character of the Premier as a citizen and a statesman, must inevitably produce—was needed to turn the tide of popular feeling against the lavish expenditure of borrowed money upon public works, and to condemn the Government policyas strenuously as it now appeared to be advocated. . . .

After a tirade upon the purely unselfish and patriotic motives by which he himself was actuated, the leader of the Opposition continued :

It had yet to be ascertained what was the result of the late General Election (excited cries of 'Hear, hear' from the Government benches); and the true value of the Premier's personal and political prestige required to be tested by the light of an extraordinary and unexpected revelation, which in the course of the last few days—he might almost say hours —had horrified and undeceived him.

These disclosures had, contrary to his own inclination, been forced upon him. Subsequent inquiries which he had made, and which he might add were now in further progress, had confirmed them, and he felt it his duty, in the present condition of political affairs, and in the face of a critical measure affecting the most vital interests of the colony, to place before the House the facts which had been brought under his notice.

With the instinct of defence, Dyson Maddox rose to ask whether the charges to which the honourable member alluded bore directly upon the political career of the Premier.

Mr. Middleton asserted that they had a strong if indirect bearing upon the honourable gentleman's connection with the politics of Leichardt's Land.

A point of order was mooted and hotly discussed. It was declared that the leader of the Opposition was not justfiied in bringing forward charges against any honourable member which did not come under the jurisdiction of the House. Several members spoke, and it was finally weakly ruled by the Speaker that Mr. Middleton should be allowed to proceed.

During the opening of Mr. Middleton's speech, Longleat had sat indifferent and motionless, with that dazed expression upon his face which upon his entrance had attracted universal attention, and had caused the whisper to go round that the Premier looked as though he had had a fit. It was expected at the onset that he would rise in hot wrath and indignantly repudiate his enemy's accusations, and the gallery eagerly anticipated the culmination of an already sufficiently thrilling debate in a stormy scene, which should be unparalleled in the annals of the House.

But Longleat allowed the question of order—clearly his opportunity for protest—to pass by, and indeed seemed too deeply absorbed in the examination of a packet of letters which had been brought in and handed to him, to take any heed of the altercation. Before him was Constance Vallancy's cold confession of her infatuation for Fielding, of her calm determination, seeing that shame must inevitably be her portion, to combine the reward of such love as hers with the penalty of social degradation; her expression of thanks for his *kindness;* her formal regret that henceforth their paths must lie apart; her hope that in the not very distant future he might meet with a woman who could honourably bear his name, and be a second mother to his children.

It was a sorry consummation to the sinful projects which had dominated alike his affection for his daughter and his political ambition, and had heated him to a fiercer fever-pitch than the most burning impulses of youth.

A passion rushing with all the impetuosity of middle age, and suddenly checked, is more overwhelming in its disastrous effect than the most terrible outside calamity. Longleat's head dropped upon his breast. The room became all blackness. The voices of the disputants sounded in his ears like the roaring of threatening waves. It seemed to him, later on, that he had been seized with unconsciousness, though he knew not for how long.

When he awoke to light and hearing his brain surged, and he had a confused sense of impending ruin which it was useless to try and avert; and it was some minutes before he was able to grasp the meaning of Mr. Middleton's denunciatory harangue.

It was about this point that he took up the thread of his adversary's oration.

The career of the honourable gentleman now sitting at the head of the Government had for the last twenty years been brought too prominently before the public to require comment in that place. . . .

Mr. Longleat had not sought to hide the fact that he had commenced life in the colony as a bullock-driver upon the Kooya road; he had openly gloried in his elevation, by means of his single-handed exertions, to the high position he now held. He had started in Leichardt's Land from almost the first rung of the ladder, and though in the minds of some, suspicion had lain latent, no one had taken the trouble to inquire from what lower level he had sprung.

Cries of 'Shame!' 'Order!' 'Hear, hear!' sounded through the Chamber. . . . It was to a period antecedent to that which embraced the Leichardt's Land stage of the Premier's history that he, Mr. Middleton, wished to call the attention of honourable members of that House.

The Leader of the Opposition paused

pointedly. All eyes were bent towards the Ministerial bench, and fixed themselves upon Longleat. The Premier lifted his head; his mouth twitched; he turned irresolutely to his colleagues, and half-rose from his seat. Then an expression of dogged desperation settled upon his features; his head drooped again, and his eyes were lowered upon the carpet.

To the gallery, his silence seemed to imply disdain; but among the members who were in ignorance of Middleton's drift, there was a movement of mistrust and alarm. This was not the line of attack which had been anticipated. It had been supposed that Government measures during the recess would be called into question, and upon various points the Ministers were armed with retaliating arguments, though the volley of aimless abuse which they had expected had not, to their minds, appeared to demand any special strategic defence.

But the cutting gravity and evident conviction with which Mr. Middleton spoke, suggested more serious possibilities. Could it be that a mystery lay hidden in the past life of the Premier which would dishonour him in the sight of men—that a crime, the heinousness of which warranted its being brought forward under present circumstances—was to be laid to his charge? It occurred to several to demur at the informality of the proceedings; and one or two black sheep reflected inwardly upon the unpleasant consequences to be apprehended from an indiscriminate investigation into the obscurity of private history. A further protest was made against the irrelevancy of the discussion, and Mr. Middleton hotly defended his line of conduct. The past of great men, he urged—and he was far from denying that the Premier had achieved greatness of no ordinary kind in the annals of a young nation

—was the property of the State; how much more so when in a momentous crisis, such as was made evident by the present juncture of political affairs, the faith of the colony was pinned upon its principal legislator! The charge he had to make did not touch upon the Premier's position as a private member of the House, in which case it would be obviously unnecessary and ill-judged to drag out of the miry past incidents in his former life which might be buried in oblivion; but upon his position as the political leader of an important colony, who had identified himself so completely with the interests of Leichardt's Land that her very credit and reputation might be said to have become embodied in the person of her representative. It was but just that the country should be made aware what manner of man had sneaked into the good graces of the public, and assumed the reins of power. . . . He would make his statement. Let the Premier deny it if he was able. . . . When the matter had been placed before the House, he, Mr. Middleton, would leave it to the judgment of the Speaker and of honourable members to determine, whether the extraordinary circumstances of the case admitted of any other line of action on his part.

Suddenly Longleat rose. He folded his arms, and, with a look of defiant desperation, surveyed the House, while he thundered forth:

'Well, then, let the honourable member for North Leichardt's Land say what he has got to say agen me.'

The groans and hisses, which proceeded from upstairs, drowned Mr. Middleton's accusing voice, and a bushman, leaning over the railings, shouted:

'Speak up and let's have done with it. It ain't the Premier that's a sneak and a liar.'

A commotion ensued. It was ruled that

the galleries should be cleared, and the excited and disappointed crowd was forcibly ejected.

The substance of Middleton's lengthy prelude and accusation may be briefly summarised:

That in the year 18— Thomas Prancard, a youth employed upon the estate of Sir Henry Calders, Bart., of Calderwoods, in Suffolk, England, had upon the occasion of a poaching affray, during which he, with others, had gone to the assistance of the keepers, shot Captain Harry Calders, the eldest son of his master, through the heart. The two young men having quarrelled some days previously, it was supposed that Prancard had made use of this opportunity to commit a deliberate murder, and had endeavoured to disarm suspicion by a semblance of accident; but at the trial, which took place some months later, the supposed seduction of

Prancard's sister by the deceased, had thrown an extenuating light upon the motive of the murder. A verdict of guilty had been coupled with a recommendation to mercy, and a sentence of penal servitude for the term of twenty-one years had been passed upon the prisoner.

That Thomas Prancard had been transported to Western Australia, but that, on account of certain services rendered upon the occasion of a convict outbreak against the authorities, his term of punishment had been curtailed, and at the expiration of fourteen years he had received his discharge and had quitted the colony.

That he had been known at Ballarat Diggings and at other places under the alias of Thomas Longleat, and had, under that name, entered into partnership as a bullock-driver with one Jem Bagot, a ticket-of-leave-man.

That papers containing a full account of the trial and conviction, and proofs of the identity of Thomas Prancard with the honourable gentleman who represented Kooya, should be laid before the House.

Mr. Middleton, with a brief justification of his part in the discharge of this painful duty, and a finely-turned, somewhat sarcastic appeal to the judgment of that honourable House to decide whether it was conducive to the reputation of the colony that, at this most important crisis in its history, a convicted murderer should hold the reins of government, and appear before the Imperial authorities as the chosen representative of Leichardt's Land. . . .

An old member rose, and, after carefully asserting his independence of personal bias, proceeded to take a temperate view of the allegations which had been hurled at the Premier. . . . Never, during the whole course of his Parliamentary experience, had he assisted at a more painful debate. . . . In the annals of colonial legislature there was no precedent for such a scene as had taken place . . . He thought that, as the matter had gone so far, it ought to be thoroughly investigated and cleared up. But this should be done outside the walls of that House. These charges ought not to go forth to the world unless they were disproved or substantiated. He, for his part, did not attach any importance to the accusations which had been brought against the Premier. He was convinced that Mr. Middleton had been the dupe of evil-disposed persons whose object it was to ruin the credit of the Government, and that the leader of the Opposition would find it a difficult matter to supply the evidence which was wanting to corroborate his statements. . . . The whole story carried absurdity upon its face. Was it probable that, had the tale been true, it would not have leaked out ere now? It was his opinion that nothing more than an emphatic denial on the part of the Premier was needed to set doubts at rest upon both sides of the House. He deplored that at the onset of the session, the attention of the House should be devoted to a merely sensational subject, to the exclusion of important business, etc., etc.

There was a brief whispered consultation among the Ministers. Dyson Maddox bent forward and spoke to the Premier.

'You will answer this cowardly attack?'

Longleat's head was still bent; he lifted it, and exhibited a ghastly face to his colleague.

'Good God!' exclaimed Dyson, startled by his appearance. 'What has happened to you? Are you ill?'

'I—I am ill,' repeated Longleat, speaking in a hollow tone, with a hesitating emphasis upon his words. 'There's something the matter—with my head. For God's sake, get the House adjourned. . . . I am—not equal to making a speech. . . . Of course it is all a d——d lie ; you don't want me to swear that, I suppose. I tell you that I am ill. I think that I have had a sort of fit. The whole thing may go to the devil, for what I care.'

'You *must* deny the charge,' urged Dyson. 'Make an effort. Don't you see that everyone's eyes are upon you ? Collect yourself, and get up and give Middleton the lie.'

The confused buzz which had spread down each side of the Chamber, and was rapidly deepening into a roar, drowned the brief colloquy between the Ministers.

Cries of 'Order !' 'Shame !' 'Speak up like a man !' sounded above the tumult. The excitement had become so personal and intense, that all other considerations were swept before it as straws in the face of a wind. To restore order was beyond the power of any brand-new Speaker ; and indeed, that functionary, forgetting the burden of his lately-acquired dignity, and absorbed by the interest of the scene, leaned forward over his desk, and fixing upon Longleat a gaze of eager curiosity, joined in the general murmur of expectation.

The death-like pallor of the Premier's face, his downcast attitude and evident hesitation to meet the charge, had caused a thrill of doubt to rush through the Assembly, and, by the wonder-loving and malevolent, were construed into a half admission of guilt.

But distrust was soon succeeded by a revulsion. Longleat rose. He stepped forward with his burly form erect, his chest heaving, and his under-lip protruding, in ghastly mockery of his usual attitude while haranguing the people.

His gaze, half-wrathful, half-desperate, swept the House from the Speaker's chair to below the bar, and a profound silence fell upon the noisy occupants of the benches. Upon every face, save that of the leader of the Opposition, which was sneering and impassive, there was depicted the most breathless anxiety.

With the consciousness of personal influence, there came once more to Longleat the strong sense of predominance. He spoke. Never had his voice rung out more sonorously. Never had his rough, powerful oratory made its mark more surely. He thundered forth defiance of his enemies. He inveighed against the conversion of an honourable debate into a vehicle for falsehood and calumny. He appealed to the confidence of his friends—to the country which he had faithfully served—to the Parliament of Leichardt's Land, towards which he had never failed in respect.

He denied upon his honour as a member of that House that he had ever committed a crime punishable by the laws of England, that he had ever been in Western Australia in his life, or had heard the name of Prancard before that afternoon. The sweat stood in great drops upon his brow; he staggered and fell heavily to his seat; he knew that he had struck his last blow.

Dyson Maddox rose to make a brief explanation on the part of his colleague. The Premier, he stated, had since the meeting of the House been attacked by sudden illness. Only the urgency of the occasion had induced him to remain through the debate, and had enabled him to deliver the powerful speech to which they had listened. He was physically unequal to further argument or contradiction. The monstrous nature of the charge must be evident to all, and called for no comment upon the part of the Government beyond the Premier's vigorous denial. It remained now for the leader of the Opposition to make good his case. . . . He, Maddox, desired to call again the Speaker's attention to the irrelevancy of the discussion to the subject at issue, and moved formally the adjournment of the House for the resumption of the debate upon the Address in reply, under more seemly conditions.

Mr. Middleton stepped forward mid groans and hisses, and for some time was not allowed to proceed. At last, with difficulty, he obtained a hearing for his statement. That he would not oppose the motion of the Minister for Lands for the adjournment of the debate; that upon the day but one following he would be in a position to present further and conclusive evidence in support of the charge he had brought against the Premier, and that he was ready to lay all papers connected with it upon the table of the House.

There was a slight altercation as to whether the House should or should not be adjourned. An independent member deplored the personal attack upon the Premier, but vindicated the right of the House to pass judgment upon the charge. Honourable members, he averred, might abuse each other with impunity during the heat of debate, but such an accusation, directed against the political leader of the colony, would go forth to the world and cover the Chamber with disgrace, unless disproved and repudiated. . . . He had of course heard rumours that the Government was to be attacked, but he had little thought that a charge of this kind would be brought forward, or that the leader of the Opposition would make himself responsible for it.

'I accept the responsibility,' gravely affirmed Mr. Middleton.

A member upon the Government side spoke next in hot defence of his chief, concluding with a vigorous denunciation of the tactics of his opponents. . . . This, then, was the grand Opposition attack—this their noble policy. . . . They did not care for a policy to be advocated for the colony so long as they could impeach the Premier. . . . The business of the country might go to the dogs provided their Leader got on the Treasury bench. . . . Finally, the motion was put and passed in the affirmative, and the House broke up.

The members gathered in excited groups below the bar, some lingering, others passing eagerly to the smoking-room or crowding in the lobby. Middleton was among the first to disappear ; it was evident that he was not desirous of an encounter with the Premier. Dyson Maddox stood beside his chief, the centre of a knot of Ministers, who talked excitedly, more among themselves than to their leader. Several of the Ministerial supporters approached and expressed their horror and indignation at Middleton's attack, and their sympathy with the Premier in his indisposition. But their overtures were awkwardly offered and apathetically received. Longleat hardly replied. Of what consequence would it be on the morrow whether his comrades believed him to be a murderer to-day? Of what use to continue struggling against fate, which had evidently doomed him to destruction?

A reactionary wave of doubt had succeeded the enthusiasm with which his denial had been greeted. In the minds of all, there lurked an uneasy consciousness that something was amiss. The word murder has an ugly sound, and the shock of the accusation had been so startling that the members had been unable to collect their thoughts sufficiently to reason calmly upon the charge. The whole proceeding had been unconstitutional, unprecedented. The impeachment had shaken even well-seasoned nerves. Though the convict taint is not unknown in the Chambers of Australian legislature, perhaps nowhere is it more severely reprobated. Had the Premier been convicted of a political error, a moral peccadillo, or even of malpractices in his administration, there were many to whom the misdemeanour would have appeared comparatively trivial.

Bureaucratic morality in Australia admits of wide generalisations, and though the *liaison* with Mrs. Vallancy and bestowal of the Gundaroo appointment upon her husband had gone far towards weakening Longleat's social reputation, his political prestige had not been impaired; but this stroke at the very root of the Premier's character, this bold assertion of duplicity and crime in a career which for twenty years had appeared open and honourable, was too grave a matter to be lightly dismissed. The deepest convictions were undermined, and those who but a few hours before, had only dreamed of applauding were now startled into something like condemnation.

After the first natural recoil many reasoned among themselves that a man so astute as Mr. Middleton would have hesitated to bring forward a charge which he was unable to substantiate; others maintained that the whole proceeding was a last coup on the part of a revengeful minority, and that the story had been trumped up with a view to awaken distrust and cripple the forces of the Government; while others, granting that the leader of the Opposition had been misled by false information, defended his conduct in bringing the matter before Parliament instead of attacking the Premier through the medium of the newspapers or allowing the information to leak out through private channels.

Longleat spoke in constrained tones, with his eyes again upon the ground.

'I am ready,' he said, in answer to the

eager inquiries with which he was beset, 'to meet this calumny—to prove how monstrous it is. I can say no more. . . . Little, you will hear from me the first thing to-morrow. I—I am not myself to-night, as you see. An attack of the heart. I am subject to them occasionally. It—it seized me immediately after the Opening this morning. I had doubts about being present at the debate, but I—as you know—I have never neglected my duty to the public. Good-night! Dyson, perhaps you will walk with me to the corner. I must go home.'

'It was a fit,' said one of the members, who was a doctor, to the Minister for Works. 'If anything happens to-night I shall not be in the least surprised. I have seen it coming on for weeks. These bull-necked men are never safe. Only his temperate habits have, till the last few months, kept him in health; and you may depend upon it, the strain of the elections, and excitement from other causes—you know what I mean—have conduced to this sort of thing.'

The speaker made a significant gesture with his hand to his mouth, which was a calumny indeed as far as Longleat was concerned, but which was the source of a malignant report circulated later.

'A queer story that of Middleton's,' continued the doctor. 'Now I begin to understand the rumours that have been flying about during the last two days. They say that Vallancy, who is mad about his wife, has had something to do with it. By the way, there's a story afloat that she went off in the *Hydaspes* to-day, to join Fielding in Sydney—can that have had anything to do with the Premier's sudden attack?—and that old Ferris, the cracked storekeeper at Kooralbyn, supplied the information. There was something deucedly odd about his connection with Longleat. Well, after all, it is not so very unlikely. They call it murder, but hang me if I don't think that a man is half-justified in killing another man for seducing his sister! Women are always at the bottom of mischief. And Vallancy gets his revenge, though I should think it is rather a good thing for him to have got quit of his wife. . . Things come pretty square in this world. . . It is not particularly creditable to the colony to have an *old hand* at the head of affairs, but I don't see that it makes much odds to his policy.'

This latitudinarian view of the case admitted of free argument. Meanwhile the Premier, accompanied by Dyson, had left the Chamber.

CHAPTER XIII.

LAST WORDS.

LEANING upon Dyson's arm, Longleat walked down the corridor and descended the stone steps by which the great door of the Parliamentary Buildings was approached.

The night was dark and murky. It was about eight o'clock; the moon had not yet risen, and only the great lamps above the gateway and the starlike lights of the town illuminated the blackness. Against one of the pillars at the entrance crouched an elf-like human form, which, suddenly raising itself, stepped forward and confronted the Premier.

A ray from the lantern above shone upon the leering lips and malicious eyes of Sammy Deans; but Longleat, walking uncertainly with his gaze fixed upon vacancy, and unconscious of all save his own miserable personality, would have passed the free-selector by, had not Sam's strident voice, lifted in tones of devilish triumph, arrested his attention.

'Mr. Longleat, or Mr. Prancard—it ain't no odds by which name I call you—there be nothing more to settle between you and me. I've taken my revenge for the months in gaol you gev me, and fur the little chap that cried to kiss his feyther afore he died. . . . I said that I'd bring disgrace upon you and your proud miss, who, for all her pride, is no better than her mother before her. I've done what I meant to do. 'Twur me as gev Vallancy the papers, and put him on the scent, and showed him how to prime Middleton. Happen, that for all your money and your brag and your popularity, you'll never hold up your head in that House again. Leichardt's Land has done with you. Go home and tell your girl, that looks down enough on you a'ready, that her father's been nigh to having the rope round his neck, and that she is no more than a convict's daughter.'

'By God!' cried Longleat, furiously. 'So it is you, is it, Sammy Deans, and you have been getting hold of Anthony Ferris when he was drunk, and sucking in his lies. But I'll be even with you yet!'

He made a spring at the free-selector and clutched Sam by the throat, shaking him as though he had been a dog.

Dyson interposed, and succeeded in drawing the Premier backwards; while Sammy, whose wits were keen enough to enable him to realise the danger of a struggle with a desperate man, took advantage of loosening his assailant's grasp, and wriggled away, losing himself in the shadow of the building.

Longleat uttered a deep imprecation, and leaned panting against the pillar; then half-conscious that he had betrayed himself, he said:

'The brute maddened me with his lies. It is well that you stopped me, or I might have shaken the breath out of his body. He is a mean, revengeful cur. I got him put into prison for branding my cattle, and he has a spite against me. He sneaks up to the head station at Kooralbyn, and sits drinking with old Ferris, who would invent any cock-and-bull story while in his cups, and who is crazy enough to be jealous of me.'

He took Dyson's arm again, and the two walked on for several moments in silence.

The young man's heart was beating violently, and his soul was shaken with horror and revolt. During the encounter with Deans, it had been borne in upon him that Longleat was guilty. He burned to speak out his suspicions, yet dared not, hardly knowing whether he dreaded most that they should be confirmed or meet with a lie.

The thought of disgrace was intolerable to him. Lowly birth and honest toil conveyed no shame to his frank Australian mind; but the suggestion of criminal taint in connection with Honoria was insupportable.

Presently Longleat spoke in a voice that sounded like a groan.

'It's true—when she knows of this she'll hate me for being her father. She couldn't help turning a little agen me for my rough ways and for not having been born a gentleman—I'm not blaming her. I brought her up to be proud—but I'd give my life, lad, that she should never hear the charge they've made against me to-night.'

'If the charge were false, Mr. Longleat, as you stated in the House, there would be no need that you should dread its coming to your daughter's knowledge.'

Dyson spoke with a meaning emphasis. Longleat relinquished his arm, and suddenly pausing, faced him.

'And if it were true!' he cried fiercely. 'You heard the story. A heartless scoundrel, one of the cursed breed of aristocrats, had wronged a young man's only sister, and the young man, who was a labourer and a Radical, and who acknowledged no law but that of natural justice, which decrees that an eye shall be given for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life, had planned and compassed the death of the seducer. Was this deep-dyed guilt? But the law called it murder, hounded him down, tortured him for fourteen years, then set him free, branded with the stigma of crime—and not only him, but the children whom in later years he begot — daughters, maybe — perhaps one daughter whom he loved better than his life, whom he had slaved and toiled for, whom he had brought up like a lady—fit to be a queen—was not this reason sufficient that he should shun the publicity of an act which for nearly forty years had sat lightly enough on his soul ?'

'It was an unfortunate case,' said Dyson, while Longleat paused for a moment in his incoherent speech ; 'but it would have been more honest, it would have been happier for himself and for his daughter, if when the penalty had been paid he had faced his position fairly.'

'There's something in the prison taint,' answered Longleat, speaking in a spasmodic, passionate manner, and still, as it were, making reference to a third person, 'something that, no matter what stuff a man is made of, numbs his energies, and sickens him with shame and loathing, till his whole soul is filled with a burning desire to escape from his own flesh, to transform himself into a new creature, to face the world once more, unshackled by past associations and prejudices which he abhors—in a young land where the forest is free to all, and the rich and the poor are equal in the sight of God and man. . . . And it was so with this man. He flung away his former personality with his convict dress. He took another name that had struck him haphazard in a newspaper as unlike any he had ever known. He was eager for work. He had broken stones upon the road, and sweat and labour were no hardships to him . . . And little by little money came to him, and power, and honour; and he had a dream of founding a new order of things, of being the ancestor of great men—patriots—soldiers—legislators.'

He paused again. They had reached The Bunyas, where from the fir trees and the datura flowers, and the blossoming gardenias in the borders, there exhaled a strong night fragrance.

'I am talking at random!' he exclaimed. 'I am excited—I am suffering—I don't know what I am saying. No one shall ever lay it agen the Premier,' he muttered, 'that he did not die game. Come in. I have just a word more to say, and then I must be alone. Step gently, Dyson; I don't want Honoria to know that I have come back from the House. There mustn't any rumour of what has happened reach her ears yet. Time enough for that.'

He opened the wicket-gate and motioned to his companion to enter. As they silently crossed the lawn, Dyson, looking towards the lighted windows of the drawing-room, saw Honoria's beautiful profile outlined upon the blind. Longleat watched it too for a moment, and heaved a painful sigh.

They entered the study, which but for a decaying fire upon the hearth was in darkness. Longleat lighted the candles upon the mantelshelf, and they shed a faint glow upon his haggard face, deadening its flabby whiteness, and deepening the wrinkles about the eyes and mouth.

Dyson was strangely touched.

'Mr. Longleat,' he said impulsively, holding out his hand, 'I am deeply sorry for you.'

The old man grasped it for a moment, then wiped his brow with his silk pocket-handkerchief.

'That has nought to do with it,' he said almost gruffly; 'but I thank you, lad. . . . I've had a blow to-day that's knocked me over. A stab that has cut deeper than anything Middleton has said. . . . The woman that I loved—that was as good as my wife—has played me false, and has gone off with another man. I learned it before I went into the House this afternoon. I got her letter there. The world's black to me, and I'd be glad to be out of it.'

'You mean,' said Dyson, hardly knowing what to answer, and feeling a strong repugnance to enter upon the subject, 'that Mrs. Vallancy has—has deceived you.'

'I gev her money and jewels,' continued Longleat; 'I'd almost settled a thousand a year on her for her life; I gev her all my heart and soul. More than that: everything was as nothing in comparison with her. . . . And she has gone to Fielding. O Lord! O Lord! how I loved her! I fought agen it, but it was no use; I wasn't one to steal what was another man's. I'd lived clean and honest. But there are passions in a man that are stronger than his will—it's human nature—they've been since the world began, and they can't be kept under. If her husband had been kind to her, and had treated her as she'd a right to be treated, I'd have kept away from her. But I meant to make her happy; I meant to marry her if I could. It was all fair and above-board in my mind. And now it's over, and my career is over. Fate has come upon me, and where's the use of struggling? . . . The things that I'd set my heart on are gone agen me. Those that I loved best have despised me. The country that I served is ready to turn round upon me. . . . There's been bitterness in the cup, but it's well-nigh drunk now. . . . Dyson, I've got one thing to ask you. Answer me as man to man—before God above us. If all this were true that Middleton had laid against me in the House, would it turn you from marrying Honoria?'

'Nothing would turn me from marrying

Honoria,' replied Dyson with equal impressiveness, 'if—if she would take me to be her husband. Mr. Longleat, I don't wish to mislead you. As regards Middleton's charge, that would make no difference. All my life is hers and yours—if I can serve her through serving you. Do you understand me? But I cannot marry her unless she comes to me of her free will; and she does not love me now.'

Longleat heaved a deep sigh of relief.

'She'll be safe with you,' he said. 'It's what I've hoped all along. I had a firm faith that it 'ud come about. It's part of the fulfilment of my dream—and, who knows?—the rest may come true as well. You are a fine fellow. Don't hold back. Women are coy and proud, and Honoria is hard to understand; but if she hadn't loved you, she would never have given her word. I was afraid once of that cursed Englishman; but that's over, and I'm at rest about her. It's all I've ever wanted—that she should be happy.'

Dyson was silent; he could not undeceive him.

'Good-night,' said Longleat. 'Go out quietly, so that *she* shall not know that you have been here. To-morrow you shall come and talk to her. I want her to myself now. Come again in the morning.'

'Good-night,' replied Maddox. 'I will come early—the first thing to-morrow. You—you will not do anything before you see me again.'

He would fain have said more, but the expression of Longleat's face forbade him.

'You shall know what action I mean to take,' replied Longleat, evasively. 'Nothing can be done before to-morrow.'

The two men silently shook hands, and Dyson went away by the garden-gate as quietly as he had entered.

Longleat was alone.

Mechanically he threw a log upon the fire, and watched it splutter and blaze, then placed the candles upon the table, and, leaning back in his great arm-chair, gazed moodily at the fantastic jets of flame which curled upwards from the glowing log.

Presently the inner door leading into the house opened noiselessly, and Honoria entered and stood opposite him.

'Papa,' she said softly, 'I came here to see whether you were back from the House. I knew that it must be over, for none of the windows are lighted. I grew so nervous sitting alone; I don't think that I am very well to-night. I kept Janie awake as long as I could; it was a promise that she should sit up the first night of the session. She had a notion that something very important would happen. Now she has fallen asleep upon the sofa in the drawing-room; and I wanted to talk to some one.'

There was an affectionate tone in Honoria's trembling voice, that sounded strangely in her father's ears, and was inexpressibly grateful to his heart. Her eyes were humid, and her face was almost beseeching in its tenderness. For a moment a choking lump in his throat would not let him speak, but he held out his arms to her, and she sank down upon the hearth-rug at his feet.

'Papa,' she said, looking earnestly into his face, while she laid her hand timidly upon his knee, 'the House is over early to-night, isn't it? Has anything gone wrong? You look as though something were the matter.'

'N-no, Honie,' he faltered; 'nothing is the matter.'

'You are troubled,' she persisted; 'you are unhappy; I see it in your face. There's only you and me; let us help each other if we can. . . . I—oh! I have been a bad daughter; I have not tried as I ought to sympathise with you. . . . Papa, I would comfort you if I could.'

'Honie,' he said huskily, taking her soft white hand into his horny palm, 'there need nought come between us two now. What there was is over and done with; it was a madness—a bad dream—that's past, and—and, my dear, all my heart is yours, and my life is yours; and I—I am your father, Honie.'

For a moment the feeling of repulsion which had always overcome her at the suggestion of her father's infatuation for Mrs. Vallancy held Honoria motionless and silent. Longleat heaved a deep sigh; it found its echo in her heart. She drooped her head, laying her forehead against his knees. He could not see her face, but he felt the pressure of her fingers tighten round his own.

'Honie!' he went on, in the same choked, whispering voice, 'don't let it ever trouble you, my dear, by-and-by, that you and I were different-like, and that we didn't somehow come together as we ought to have done. . . There's things in life that are hard to understand. Maybe God 'ull make more allowance up there for human nature than folks down below. . . . A rough man like me, with rude passions and coarse ways was bound to grate upon the notions of a delicate-minded creature like you. It could not have been expected that things would be otherwise —that's human nature too. I had brought you up different to what I was myself. I had reared you softly and kept you apart; that was my pride for you. It was in my mind from the time that you were a pretty little baby to educate you to be a lady. I didn't want you to be of the same kind as your mother and me. Remember that, Honie, if ever—if ever it should happen that you think hardly of me for being your father.'

'Father, father!' cried Honoria, abashed and shame-stricken; 'oh, don't talk like that. You break my heart.'

'Don't cry, Honie!' he said, with deep tenderness, though sobs shook his own frame. 'Oh, my dear, if I could make you a lady born—a gentleman's daughter—I'd sacrifice my life to do it. What's my life to your happiness? What am I that I should own such an one as you for my child? It's when I've been with you that I've felt most ashamed of my roughness. I don't mind confessing to it now. I've loved you better than you've ever dreamed of. Even when there were passions in my heart that I didn't dare to speak of, my love for you was deepest and surest. I kept the two separate. . . . But there was always the thought that you looked down upon me and held aloof from me; and I had come to believe it best that you should go your way and I mine. All that I wished was that you should be happy, and in spite of all I had a firm trust that you'd marry Dyson. It's that which reconciles me to everything now.'

'Papa,' cried Honoria, passionately, 'you think that I cannot realise what you have felt; but it is not so. . . . I know what it is to be carried away beyond oneself—beyond what one knows to be right and pure; and then to be ashamed, to hate oneself. Oh, I understand. . . . And it is that which has changed me—which has made me sorry and has taught me to distrust myself and others. . . . I haven't been a good daughter to you. I want to make amends. If *that* is all over—oh, come away with me and Janie. Let me show you that I can love you. Let me try to make your life happy. Oh, papa! let us hold together. Let us help one another.'

He bent forward and clasped her in his arms, fondling her and murmuring inarticulate words of love, while he mingled his tears with hers, though, indeed, her weeping was rather the reaction after intense excitement than the outcome of deep emotion such as now agitated him. And he, divining this, by the aid of that subtle sympathy which gives the parent's heart insight into that of the child, knowing that their souls did not now, and never could fairly meet, put her ever so slightly from him, and whispered gently:

'My gell, it is not your father that you must mind now, and I am best content that it should be so. Open your heart to your husband, and show him all your love; Dyson is worthy of confidence. Don't bottle up your feelings from him. Soft words and kisses are the food of married love. . . . He'll take my place by-and-by, and little Janie will live with you. She'll have the northern stations; Kooralbyn and this place will be your portion. With Jem Bagot's money you'll be a rich woman. Life will go smooth with you. It's what I've prayed and hoped for, that you'd be a great lady in the new country, and that your children should be rulers in the land. . . . When you have got little ones of your own you'll know, Honie, you'll know.'

Honoria's face crimsoned, but she did not speak. How could she confide in him now? How could she shape into words those complex impulses which made her heart a problem to her understanding?

They sat thus silently for some time longer, he gently caressing her, she with her head bent against his knee, sorrowful and wondering; each yearning towards the other, each mournfully conscious of the barrier of mutual incomprehension which divided them.

At last Longleat said:

'I think that I'd like to kiss the little lass before she is carried up to bed.'

Honoria rose, and they went together to the drawing-room, where Janie, her quaint, unchildlike face turned upwards, her elfin locks strewing the pillow, lay all in the glow of the dying fire.

Longleat bent down and kissed solemnly the child's lips, her brow, her hands.

'Poor little wench!' he murmured. 'God keep the little lass!'

Janie opened her large, sleepy eyes.

'Papa,' she said incoherently, 'have you done fighting with Mr. Middleton yet? I wish that you would make haste and beat him, and take us back to the Bush. I don't like stopping here. I want to go back to Kooralbyn.'

Longleat kissed her once more, then lifted her from the sofa and placed her in Honoria's arms. A stifled sob shook his body.

'Take her to bed,' he said huskily. 'It's getting late. . . And you go too, Honie; you go too.'

Honoria looked at him wistfully.

'It is eleven o'clock,' she replied. 'I will go, papa. And you are tired as well,' she added. 'Do not sit up for long.'

'No; I will not. I—have a little work to do—and then—then I shall go to rest,' said Longleat, turning away so that she should not see his face.

She kissed him gently, and bade him good-night; then left the room, bearing Janie in her arms.

Longleat watched her till she had disappeared. When she had gone, he knelt down and laid his head for a moment upon the sofa cushion where Janie had rested. His lips moved, but he spoke below his breath. A camellia which had dropped from Honoria's breast lay upon the floor. He picked it up and carried it with him to the study, where he seated himself again in the large arm-chair beside the fire.

* * * * *

By Mr. Longleat's express orders, no servant ever entered his private sanctum in the morning till he had himself given permission. It was his habit to study or write till a late hour, and his papers were usually left in confusion upon the table, so that it was dangerous to allow them to be disturbed.

Thus, when at nine o'clock the next morning Dyson Maddox presented himself at the side-door which communicated with the garden, the Premier had not been aroused. All night the young man had tossed upon an uneasy pillow, wakeful with the sense of an undefined dread, which, indeed, the events of the previous evening sufficiently warranted.

He determined that before any line of action could be adopted, he would see the Premier, would beseech his full confidence, and would then take counsel with him as to the proper course to pursue. He felt certain that, under the circumstances, it would be best for Longleat to retract the denial he had uttered in the House, resign the leadership of the Government, and again face his constituents.

As soon as it was practicable, Dyson rose, dressed, and walked to The Bunyas, choosing the side-entrance as that least likely to excite comment, and intending to make his way into the house by means of the French windows of the drawing-room, which were always unclosed.

But instinct led him to the study-door. He knocked, and, receiving no answer, pulled back the venetian shutters; their light bolts yielded readily to the assault; he pushed open the glass door and entered.

The morning light streamed into the quiet room across the office table, where the papers were all in order, the Hansards piled neatly together, and upon which stood the Premier's despatch-box with the key in the lock. In the large morocco-covered chair which was placed at one side of the empty fire-place, Longleat himself was sitting. There was a strange inertness and an unnatural stillness in his attitude which caused a shudder to run through Dyson's frame, and imparted the first suspicion of what had happened. The head was bent forward upon the chest; the hands were tightly clenched; the legs extended with a peculiar rigidity.

Dyson spoke to him by his name, but he neither moved nor answered. The young man approached the inanimate body and tried to raise the heavy head, but it was tense and cold.

'Good God!' exclaimed Dyson, in a tone of horror. 'He is dead!'

It was even so. The Premier had effectually escaped from the ruin with which he had been threatened.

Tightly enclosed in his stiffened fingers was a small empty phial—the instrument of his death. It was marked 'Poison,' and contained a solution of prussic acid, one drop of which as a dose had, Dyson knew, acted as a speedy calmant in the attacks of palpitation of the heart to which the Premier had been subject.

Upon the desk Dyson saw a sealed envelope addressed to himself. Within it, was a sheet of paper, upon which, without either formal beginning or ending, these words were written in Longleat's hand:

'Use every endeavour to obtain the papers and to quash the inquiry.'

CHAPTER XIV.

THE KNOTTING OF THE THREADS.

EVENTS succeeded each other thickly after the death of the Premier. The public excitement and curiosity was intense, and it was entirely owing to Dyson's exertions that only comparative publicity was given to the circumstances which attended Longleat's death, and that the true state of the case never came to Honoria's knowledge. The inquest was conducted as privately as possible, and a verdict was delivered to the effect that death had resulted from an overdose of a solution of prussic acid, administered medicinally to himself by the deceased, which had operated fatally upon an already diseased and excited condition of the arterial organs.

It may be questioned how far the faculty, and those more enlightened upon the subject coincided with the coroner's verdict, but, to the general public, it appeared satisfactory enough. The people mourned their leader as though he had been a hero. Letters were written in the newspapers advocating the erection of a monument at the public expense, in commemoration of his patriotism and his virtues.

His funeral *cortége* was followed by great and simple in the land. The public offices and shops were closed. The ships and steamers in the river wore their flags half-mast high. Obituary notices appeared in the journals of Leichardt's Land, edged with deep printer's black, and every sign of public mourning was rigorously observed.

The excitement of Longleat's sudden death almost swept away that which had been produced by the extraordinary scene in the House on the evening preceding it.

The debate was hushed up, and was never fully reported. Those who had believed in the Premier's guilt endeavoured for the sake of Dyson and Honoria to bury their convictions in their own breasts, while those whose faith in their chief had never wavered, reverted triumphantly among themselves to his strenuous denial of Middleton's charge as conclusive evidence in his favour.

Dyson Maddox had a long interview with the leader of the Opposition, and succeeded in obtaining the papers relating to Prancard's trial, and a promise that the subject should be dropped without further inquiry. Later on, when the House met again, it was briefly alluded to and dismissed in a personal explanation by Mr. Middleton; but now the business of forming the new Ministry occupied both sides to the exclusion of other considerations. The great Loan Bill was not passed that session. An amalgamation Government was formed, upon which the views of both parties were modified in an extraordinary manner, and the Railway question was waived till the following year. Dyson Maddox still retained his post, and Mr. Middleton accepted that of Attorney-General.

Upon the night after her father's funeral, Honoria sat alone in the drawing-room at The Bunyas. Mrs. Ferris had been written to, and was expected to arrive from Kooralbyn upon the morrow. It had been by Honoria's wish that she had been sent for, and the old lady's feelings would have been deeply gratified could she have realised how ardently her advent was desired by her favourite charge.

Honoria, broken down by the shock of her father's sudden death, by grief, remorse, and the more complex emotions of her own heart, was no longer the brilliant creature who had despised the old lady's babble, and had gloried in her independence of the common solaces of vexed humanity. At present she had an intense and womanly desire to sob out her late grief and agitation upon that sympathising if uncomprehending bosom. Yet she was at this time calmer than she had been for months.

The horror of sudden bereavement had counteracted the baleful effects of Barrington's influence, and the substitution of Dyson's soothing ministrations for the feverish and unhealthy fascination which the Englishman had exercised upon her, had restored her nervous system to a more equable balance. Dyson had been very near to her during the days which had followed her father's death.

He had thought and acted for her, and had spared her from distressing contact with the outer world. So carefully did he guard her that not a breath of vulgar insinuation had as yet reached her ears. His tact and delicate consideration had saved her from much that would have been painful and annoying; and though he had never again spoken of his love, it seemed to encompass her like the air she breathed.

She was thinking with some satisfaction that this was the last evening which she should spend by her solitary hearth, when suddenly a loud ring sounded at the entrance door, and a minute later, without warning or announcement, a gentleman was ushered into her presence.

Honoria started to her feet, and found herself confronted by Barrington.

He was very pale, and had the tall, gaunt look of a man who has just risen from a sick-bed. He advanced slowly, with deep respect expressed in his gesture and bearing, while his hollow-set eyes mournfully sought her gaze.

During her wakeful nights, Honoria had often of late trembled at the thought of this meeting. She had feared that were she again to encounter Barrington's eyes, all power of self-control would desert her, and that she should once more become a prey to the nervous terror which in his presence had overpowered her.

Yet, strange as it seemed to her then and later, after the momentary shock occasioned by his sudden appearance, she felt herself sustained by a moral and physical strength of which in their former intercourse she had been absolutely bereft. How, or when, she knew not, but it was certain that the enchantment had been broken.

She stood up very tall and stately in her clinging black gown. A deep blush dyed her face and neck, but in a moment vanished and left an ashy paleness.

'I beg your pardon,' began Barrington; 'I am afraid that I have startled you. Forgive me; I would not let the servant announce me. I thought that if you heard my name you might perhaps refuse to see me. I have come to you as soon as it was possible. I am very weak—this is the first day that I have left my bed, but I could not rest longer without speaking to you.'

He spoke very quietly; and she, with the strange feeling of listening to her own voice as to the voice of another person, replied in a low, constrained manner:

'You were right. Had I known that you were here, I should have refused to see you. It is an insult to me to force yourself upon me in this way. You can have nothing to say to me—*now!* Will you go away at once—if not, I must leave the room.'

'Honoria!' he exclaimed in a passionate tone, as he approached and looked down upon her.

She shrank involuntarily. He had placed himself so that she could not readily gain the door. A wave of scorn and indignation passed over her soul. She moved a step backwards, and then faced him without flinching.

'Let me pass,' she said.

'No. Will you not wait one moment and hear what I have to say? Are you afraid of me? Are you angry with me? What have I done, that you should treat me so disdainfully? Is all my love to go for nothing because of a fancy—a misconception? . . . I swear that you were sacred to me. Could you have thought that I would insult you who had consented to bear my name? I have come to-night to ask you again to be my wife . . . I love you as I can love no other woman. What I offer you is not unworthy of your acceptance. I can place you in the station to which you are suited—amid the refined surroundings for which your nature has craved. . . . I come to you in the deepest humility. I confess that I was greatly to blame for placing yon in a position which might compromise you. I have endured agonies since that night. My madness—my passion for you led me beyond the bounds of prudence. I wish to atone. How can I prove my loyalty more effectually than by offering to make you my wife? . . .'

'*You offer* to make me your wife,' she said, in low, distinct tones. '*You are very loyal.*'

'Honoria, you *will* misunderstand me. I am ready now to sacrifice my prospects, to disregard my mother's prayers, if it is your desire that I should remain longer in Australia. . . . Only tell me your wishes, and I will obey them at any cost. Darling, you were not so hard to move a little while ago. You know that your heart is all mine. It is

I who have taught you to love. Oh, Honoria, come to me!'

'Let me pass,' she said again, with an imperious gesture.

He fell back a few paces, and she went on, speaking with withering scorn.

'Every word that you utter is an insult. Your love is an insult. . . . I thought a little while ago that the shame of looking in your face would be too intolerable. I am glad that I have been able to bear it—that I might tell you with my own lips that the spell you cast over me is broken. I can have no feeling for you but pity. . . . I wish never to hear your voice again. Good-bye.'

She walked steadily past him and left the room, without bestowing upon him another word or glance. When she had reached her own chamber she bolted the door and threw herself all quivering and unnerved upon the bed.

Barrington, left alone in the drawing-room, lingered for a little while in the hope that Honoria might return. He put forth all the strength of his will to recall her, but it was in vain. As she herself had said, the spell was broken.

He stood, looking round the room, and noting all those little traces of the being beloved which are so patent to the eye of a lover—her work, her books, the flowers she had touched, the mirror which had reflected her beauty ; and there was a maddening pain in the conviction which was borne in upon his heart, that Honoria had passed out of his life for ever, and that he must fill up the blank as best he could.

There was a photograph of her standing in a little velvet frame upon the mantelshelf. He took it up and carried it away with him.

* * * * *

Upon the following day Mrs. Ferris arrived from Kooralbyn. The old lady kissed Honoria and blessed her and wept over her, at one moment bemoaning the rupture of her engagement with Barrington, who still retained a tender place in Aunt Pen's regard, at another congratulating her upon her impending marriage with Dyson.

Mrs. Ferris shed many tears over the Premier's fate, and could find no terms of reprobation sufficiently strong to stigmatise the conduct of Mrs. Vallancy, who, she was convinced, had been at the bottom of all the mischief.

'Aunt Penelope,' said Honoria, when they had been talking for a little while together, 'I am thinking of going away for a time, and of taking Janie with me. I want a change of scene. Will you come with us to Tasmania? We shall spend the summer there, perhaps take a trip to New Zealand, and then winter in Sydney or Melbourne.'

'But what is to become of my old man?' cried Mrs. Ferris, with the tears streaming down her cheeks. 'My love, it went to my heart to leave him yesterday. I couldn't have done it, if I hadn't felt it my duty to come to you. Anthony was always a little crazy, but since Angela died there isn't a grain of sense left in him. And he is such a poor weak creature and has so fallen to nothing that a rough wind might easily blow him away. Now is my turn, my love. There's always work in the world for geniuses. It's we dull women who must be the soothers and sympathisers. But, do what I will, I can't interest Anthony. If he would only look at his pictures or take down his Shakespeare I should feel happier; but there he sits all day long, with his hands folded before him and his eyes fixed in a vacant stare upon the mountains or the sky, till a poor body's heart aches with the longing to comfort him.

He takes no heed of anything. Even when I told him of your father's death he just looked up and nodded his head, and it's my belief that when night came he had forgotten what I said to him.'

Honoria finally decided, and to her credit be it recorded, to invite the old man to bear them company in their travels; but this he curtly refused to do. He would not leave Kooralbyn; nor ever afterwards could he be persuaded to quit the vicinity of his daughter's grave. It was his harmless fancy that the spirit of Angela still hovered round her old haunts, and that in the dim twilight of a summer's evening he might again behold in some secluded nook by the river the shadowy, white-robed form of his lost darling.

He lived on at Kooralbyn, a decrepit old man of disconnected speech and wandering steps, whose closest earthly interests seemed centred upon the quiet spot beneath the cedar-trees where Angela lay buried.

Soon after the death of the Premier, Honoria, accompanied by Mrs. Ferris and Janie, set off on a visit to Tasmania.

Dyson Maddox made all the necessary arrangements for their departure and absence from Leichardt's Land, taking upon himself the burden of providing for the management of the various stations, and of all business transactions from which it was possible that Honoria could be relieved; with great tact and delicacy he warded from her all distasteful companionship or malevolent gossip, and guarded against any jarring of her sensibilities by a careful avoidance of allusion to their mutual relations.

It was only by the strongest effort of self-control that he maintained the fraternal demeanour that characterised his intercourse with her, while she, in her turn, was nervously fearful lest he should suspect her of in any way misconstruing his motives.

Though neither dared approach the subject, it had at first been tacitly understood between them, that during Honoria's lengthy absence the rupture of the false engagement should be announced; but of late, as day by day her dependence upon him became greater, and her insight into his character deeper, frank understanding between them seemed to grow more and more impossible.

A great sadness had settled upon Honoria; she was often silent, and indulged in fits of melancholy retrospection, brooding over the estrangement which had divided her from her father, upon their last mournful interview, and upon his wish, so forcibly expressed then, that she should become Dyson's wife.

During the time that she remained at The Bunyas after the Premier's death, she shunned society, refused all sympathy and condolence, and, with a mingling of dread and impatience, waited for the moment of her departure and of her farewell to Dyson, when she fancied that the barrier of reserve between them might at last be broken down.

He accompanied them as far as the Bay, whence he had arranged to return to Leichardt's Town in the Government steam-tug.

He, too, looked worn and harassed; his eyes rested frequently upon Honoria, and he busied himself in preparations for her comfort; but he held aloof from her side, and seemed anxious to avoid taking advantage of any opportunity that occurred for private conversation between them.

Honoria sat still upon the deck, her eyes, humid with unshed tears, fixed vacantly upon the opposite shores; a pain, which she had never known before, gnawing at her heart, as she realised that each landmark passed represented so many moments the less to be spent with Dyson.

At last the freshening breeze, laden with salt whiffs from the ocean, the widening river, the line of beacons which marked the bar, the slackening of the steamer's speed—told her that the time had come.

In a choked voice she called him to her.

He was at her side in a moment. She rose from her seat, and they moved apart and stood against the bulwarks together.

Honoria raised her veil, and he saw how pale she was, and how her lips trembled, and her eyes were dim with tears.

'Honoria!' he said only, but there was deep meaning in his tone.

'I am sorry,' she faltered,—'sorry to say good-bye. . . . And I wish to thank you—to tell you—I cannot bear that we should part without a word. . . . You think that I have been blind to your goodness—I have not—indeed—indeed . . .'

'I understand,' he said, very low, bending over her and tightly clasping her hand. 'I did not mean to speak now; I wished that you should go away—that you should be untrammelled by any thought that I had the remotest claim upon your life. All my desire has been to trample down my own feelings, if it were best for you that I should be a cipher. . . . You know what has been in my heart—and I have tried to root it out, but it was of no use. I thought that when you had gone away it would be less difficult, perhaps, to give you up. . . . If you cannot love me, Honoria—as you have never yet loved—it will be happiest for us both that we should never meet again—and so it should be. I would leave Leichardt's Land—if otherwise—then you have but to write me one word, and I will come to you. . . . God keep you!—Good-bye. . . .'

With one last pressure of her hand he left her side ere she could utter a word in reply . . . Presently, he went on board the steam-launch, which turned her prow towards Leichardt's Town, while Honoria was borne across the bar, oceanwards.

* * * * *

Honoria took a cottage in Hobart Town, where by the banks of the Derwent she and Janie passed several quiet months. Mrs. Ferris, having installed her young charges in the care of an unobtrusive elderly friend, returned to her husband at Kooralbyn.

Later on, Dyson Maddox found his way to Tasmania, and he and Honoria were married.

Dyson is now Premier of Leichardt's Land. To him has been entrusted the floating of the Loan and the carrying out of Longleat's Railway. A little while ago he and his wife made the grand tour by way of America, and spent a season in London, where Honoria had ample opportunities for studying English life. Mrs. Maddox was presented at Court; she was fortunate in having good introductions, and her beauty and fascinating manners were the theme of comment in general and even fashionable society. Her reputation for enormous wealth added largely to her popularity, and there was some talk of the formation of a company for the more effectual working of the Tarrangella tin-mine.

At a dinner-party in the house of a great London lady Honoria met Barrington. He was with his wife, the daughter of a peer, a lady of statuesque appearance and cold manners, who in a moment identified the Australian beauty as the original of a certain photograph in a velvet-covered frame, which reposed in a secret drawer of her husband's despatch-box, and was connected with that brief sojourn in the Antipodes, of which she could never persuade him to speak frankly.

Barrington and Honoria bowed stiffly at first, but afterwards Lord and Lady Dolph Bassett furnished a text for conversation. Lord Dolph was still living at Dyraaba, neither less enthusiastic nor more practical than heretofore, and Maggie still rode buck-jumpers and helped to brand the calves. There was no talk of their coming to England, nor did Lord Headington show any particular anxiety to greet his Australian sister-in-law.

It would have been contrary to human nature had Barrington abstained from satisfying himself as to whether Honoria had found the true road to happiness. Probably he put a leading question, for Dyson, hovering about his wife, caught the words, delivered with a stronger emphasis than the languid interest of an after-dinner conversation appeared to warrant:

'I have never regretted having married an Australian; and I wish for no better fate than to cast in my lot with that of Leichardt's Land.'

Lady Edith Barrington joined with her husband in a courteous invitation to the Maddoxes to visit Castle Barrington, but it was declined, and Honoria never saw the home which might have been her own.

Sammy Deans is still accused of branding his neighbours' cattle, and Tom Dungie has given up running the mail, and has installed Miss MacCutchan as the mistress of the Selection and of the little 'piebald.'

Corny Cathcart has never been to Barramunda since Honoria went there shortly after her marriage. He is managing the station 'up north,' which in the Premier's will was left to little Janie.

Brian Fielding is married, and those interested in Constance Vallancy's fate may witness her nightly performances as an actress at the Regalia Theatre.

Honoria's boys are stalwart young Australians, who have already announced their intention of distinguishing themselves upon the boards of the House, and who promise a fair fulfilment of their grandfather's ambition.

THE END.

BILLING AND SONS, PRINTERS AND ELECTROTYPERS, GUILDFORD.
J. S. & Sons.

'One can never help enjoying "Temple Bar."'
GUARDIAN.

TWO NEW SERIAL STORIES

ARE COMMENCED IN THE

JANUARY 1881 *NUMBER*

OF

The Temple Bar Magazine,

ENTITLED

KITH AND KIN,

BY THE AUTHOR OF 'THE FIRST VIOLIN' AND 'PROBATION,'

AND

THE FRERES,

BY MRS. ALEXANDER,

Author of 'The Wooing O't,' etc.

Besides many others, the following Serial Stories have appeared in the pages of 'TEMPLE BAR':—

Lady Adelaide's Oath, by Mrs. Henry Wood.—The American Senator, by Anthony Trollope.—The Two Destinies, by Wilkie Collins.—Leah: a Woman of Fashion, by Mrs. Edwardes.—Uncle John, by Whyte-Melville.—Aurora Floyd, by Miss Braddon.—The New Magdalen, by Wilkie Collins.—Red as a Rose is She, by Miss Broughton.—Ought We to Visit Her? by Mrs. Edwardes.—The Frozen Deep, by Wilkie Collins.—Patricia Kemball, by Mrs. Lynn Lynton.—'Good-bye, Sweetheart!' by Miss Broughton.—A Vagabond Heroine, by Mrs. Edwardes.—John Marchmont's Legacy, by Miss Braddon.—The Poison of Asps, by Mrs. Ross Church.—The Wooing O't, by Mrs. Alexander.—A Race for a Wife, by Hawley Smart.—The First Violin, by Miss Fothergill.—Archie Lovell, by Mrs. Edwardes.—'Cherry Ripe,' by the Author of 'Comin' thro' the Rye.'—Vivian the Beauty, by Mrs. Edwardes.—Probation, by the Author of 'The First Violin.'—The Rebel of the Family, by Mrs. Lynn Linton.—Adam and Eve, by Mrs. Parr.

'"TEMPLE BAR" is sparkling and brilliant. It might command a constituency by its fiction alone, but it takes so much care of its more solid matter, that if there were no stories at all there is enough to interest the reader.'—ENGLISH INDEPENDENT.

'Temple Bar' can be obtained Monthly, price one Shilling; Annual Subscription, Twelve Shillings, or by post Fourteen Shillings and Six pence, in the United Kingdom, Europe, or North America.

To be obtained through all Booksellers.